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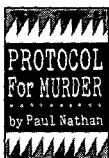
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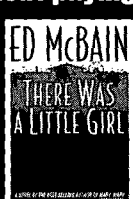
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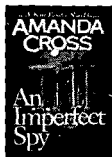
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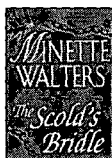
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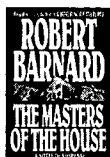
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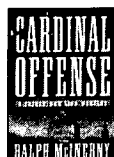
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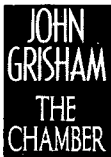
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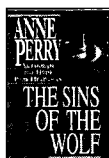
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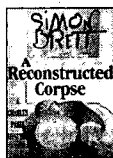
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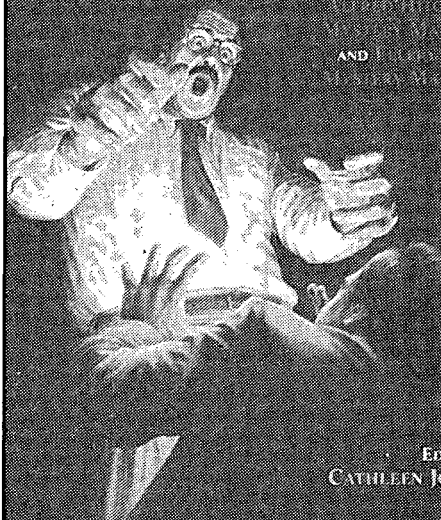
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Charles Ardai

Once known primarily as the home of Micro-soft, Tom Hanks, the TV sitcom *Frasier*, and more espresso bars than even the hungriest caffeine junkie could sip at in a lifetime, Seattle now has a new credit to its name: for the thousand or so people who descended on the Stouffer Madison hotel over the week-end of October eighth last year, Seattle became identified as a mystery maven's mecca.

The occasion was the silver anniversary of Bouchercon, an annual gathering of authors, editors, readers, collectors, and fans named in honor of the late Anthony Boucher, himself an author, editor, reader, collector, and fan of no mean renown. Over the past quarter century, Bouchercon has grown to be the preeminent event of the mystery year, a catch-all conven-

tion where you can complete your Raymond Chandler paperback collection, argue the merits of Mickey Spillane's fiction with Sue Grafton and Lawrence Sanders, hear Tony Hillerman hold forth on the authenticity of his Native American milieu, and collect autographs from every author on your bookshelf (with the possible exception of Arthur Conan Doyle, and I say "possible" because I think I saw one under glass in the dealers' room).

Unlike the Edgar Allan Poe awards, held each April in New York City, Bouchercon was not originally intended for professionals in the field, though by now professionals probably make up a good third of the attendees. Ordinary mortals are welcome and, for the price of a membership in the convention

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz**, Assistant Editor; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czezko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Marilyn Roberts**, Director of Production; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Cynthia Manson**, Vice President of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff**, Associate Publisher; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices, New York:** (212) 782-8549. **Advertising Representative:** Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

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and a hotel room, get to rub shoulders with the men and women behind their favorite stories, who in turn get to rub shoulders with each other. There, by the bar, is that Walter Mosley, and behind him, Donald E. Westlake? Next to you in the elevator, could that have been Dorothy Salisbury Davis? (It could; it was.) In the dealers' room you look up from a stack of Liza Cody novels to see . . . Liza Cody, looking up from a stack of yours. It's a heady atmosphere that calls to mind that old phrase from the days of Louella Parsons: everyone who is anyone is here.

Also everything that is anything. Not only are the quickly erected shelves of the dealers' room crammed with books of all descriptions (a collection of Agatha Christie's poetry! the long-out-of-print first novels of Stanley Ellin and Robert L. Fish! the four hundred-page *Encyclopedia Mysterosa*!), they also showcase every kind of curiosity and oddity.

Did you know that in nineteen fifty-something there was a Philip Marlowe board game? There was, and for sixty dollars it can be yours. Would you like a copy of Edgar-winner Wendy Hornsby's new short story, "High Heels Through the Headliner"? Jim Seels, easily the most extravagant and

imaginative small-press publisher in the field, has two editions to show you; one is bound in red moiré fabric, the other in black patent leather. (He'll also sell you a collection of Lawrence Block's "Ehrengraf" stories that comes in a functioning ten pound book press and a Maxine O'Callaghan bibliography encased in lucite.)

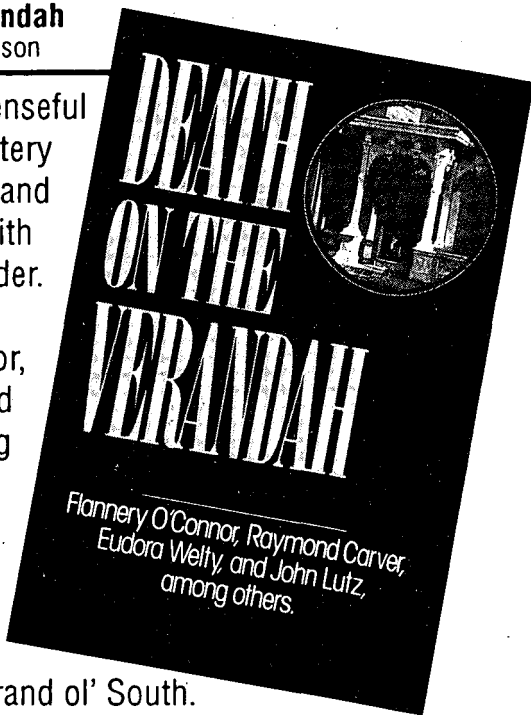
Outside the dealers' room, some of the convention's action goes on behind closed doors—after midnight, for instance, at least a half dozen illegal poker games rage in one suite or another as authors in green plastic eyeshades try to out-Damon Runyon each other—but much of the best action takes place right in the open. Bouchercon not only plays host to scads of meetings and panel discussions, but also has long been the forum for two of the field's most prestigious awards, the Anthony, given at the banquet that is the convention's centerpiece, and the Shamus, given by the Private Eye Writers of America at a session immediately preceding the banquet. Anyone who has watched the Academy Awards knows the delirious torment that goes along with any presentation of awards: the nervous smiles; the applause, at turns thunderous and grudging; the fingers hastily un-

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crossed in embarrassment; the beaming victors, clutching their burnished trophies and plaques; the also-rans, pulling their fedoras lower over their eyes and making a beeline for the darkest, smokiest joint in the city.

This year I knew the delirious torment from a little closer than usual, since I was up for a Shamus Award for "Nobody Wins," a story from the Mid-December 1993 issue of AHMM. My fellow nominees included Jeremiah Healy, Walter Mosley, Doug Allyn, and Lawrence Block, for "The Merciful Angel of Death," a powerful story featuring his famous series detective Matthew Scudder (who coincidentally made his short story debut in AHMM as well, back in 1977).

Block won—twice, since he was also up for Best Novel for *The Devil Knows You're Dead*, which also featured Scudder. "If I weren't so shameless, I'd be embarrassed," Larry said, looking embarrassed on his second trip to the podium.

Now, if I had to lose, there is no one I would rather have lost to; Larry is a gracious and generous man, in addition to being my favorite living author and the person who inspired me to start writing mysteries in the first place. Just hearing my name spoken in the same sentence as his is more than I ever expected to achieve when I first

put pen to paper. Still. I slunk from the room and joined Hornsby and Seels for a night of sorrow-drowning at the darkest, smokiest Thai restaurant we could find.

Then on to the poker games, green eyeshade in hand.

This year, Bouchercon will be held in Nottingham, England (as in the Sheriff of). Meanwhile, for those who prefer to stay Stateside, the PWA is holding the first ever "Eyecon" in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

One can only imagine what Eyecon will have grown into by the time it turns twenty-five. "There is a picture from back in the thirties," says Gary Warren Niebuhr, one of Eyecon's creators, "of a roomful of mystery writers lined up for the camera, and at one end is Raymond Chandler, at the other is Dashiell Hammett. It's the only time the two of them were in the same picture. And you wonder what that was like, what they were thinking about each other in that room. I think it would be great to take a picture like that at Eyecon."

I agree. As I boarded the plane out of Seattle, I had only one regret: I wished I'd brought a camera.

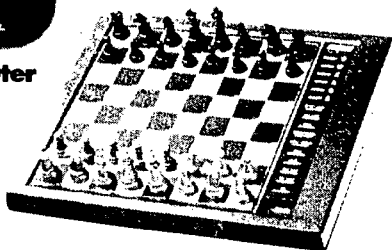
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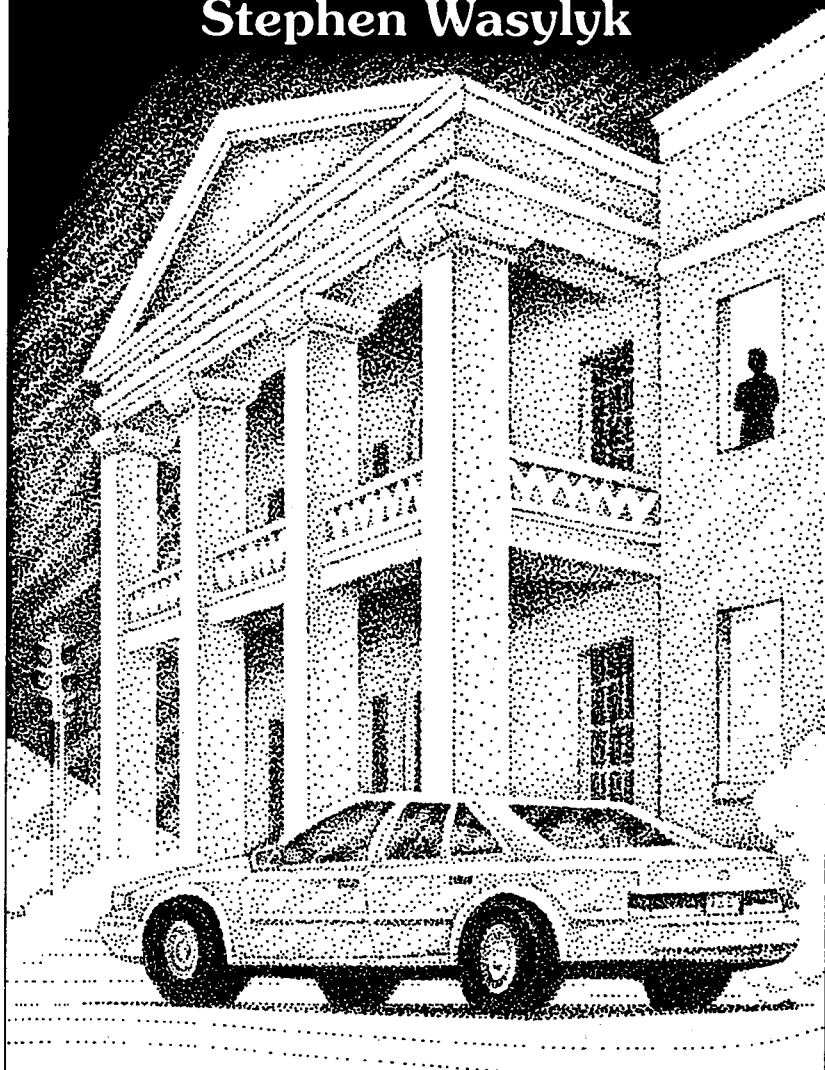


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Six floors above, the courthouse clock somberly bonged ten as Hoke Beckett, taking a break from his paperwork, placed a hand on each side of his second floor window and looked out into the night; face drawn, tie pulled loose, shirt collar unbuttoned, razor twelve hours overdue.

A fast-moving storm that morning had deposited a three inch snow, leaving the streets covered with rutted ice and a temperature more appropriate to the polar ice cap than Pennsylvania. At the otherwise deserted intersection to his left, a white sedan waited patiently at a red traffic light—the curling condensation from its tailpipe the only motion in the still night.

The four-to-midnight was Sergeant Kostmayer's, but he was at the FBI Academy for a three day seminar. Beckett didn't mind filling in. With nowhere to go and nothing else to do, he virtually lived in the office anyway.

The light changed: green, red, green. The sedan didn't move. Beckett's fingers drummed on the wall. He turned. Kowarski was tracking down Lord knew what on a computer terminal, Davis was shuffling papers.

"Davis," he said, "there's a car out front that hasn't moved. Bundle up, take a look, and tell me why."

He watched a parka-clad Davis gingerly make his way across the polished ice to the driver's side, peer in, tap the window, tug at the door, and slide around to try the other one. He looked up as he pulled his cellular phone from his pocket.

"Engine running. No driver. Passenger is passed out or dead. The doors are locked, so I can't get to him. Have to get a slip bar."

"He may need help *now*," said Beckett. "Break the window."

Davis took the clip from his piece, reversed it, and smashed the glass with the butt. He unlocked the door, head and upper torso disappearing inside. He came out faster than he'd gone in, his phone already in hand.

"Too late for help, captain. Dead. Shot in the chest."

"Stay there and call Lieutenant Spocker."

A patrol car appeared, nosing in like a curious fish. Davis gratefully dived for its warm interior.

Not too long ago Beckett would have rushed out there himself. His lack of interest could have been age-induced. Or just weariness.

*

He initialed the last form and added it to the stack on his desk as day shifters drifted in. With nothing to keep him at home, he invariably pushed everything off and leisurely disposed of it through the late hours. Very leisurely.

Spocker slid into the chair in front of his desk. Daily exercise had transformed him from the clone of a stout, well-dressed businessman into a slender one. Called out at ten thirty with the temperature at five, he'd arrived in a well-cut suit and camel's hair coat.

That presentable image will help when the time comes.

"I suppose you already know it was Lee Jordan, Hoke."

"Several people went out of their way to tell me. We don't often get a wealthy corpse."

"At least one *that* wealthy. The car wasn't there when a patrol pulled out ten minutes before you noticed it. He died early yesterday evening, obviously shot elsewhere and driven here. Not robbery. Wallet and money clip untouched. Right now he's in the morgue and the car is in the impound yard waiting for Nicholson. Nothing from him or the M.E. until at least noon. Strange. If the car had been left on a deserted road, it would have been dawn or later before he was

found. I have to believe that whoever shot him wanted the body found before then, so he deliberately left it where there is almost constant activity on a bitter winter night. In front of the police station."

Damned good thinking, but to back it up, you'd need to know why the body had to be found before morning.

Beckett rose. "You know the routine. Call everyone in and get them moving. You won't need me, but if you do, I'll be home after having breakfast down the street."

Stretched out on the recliner, he looked out over the snow covered valley through the floor-to-ceiling window. The morning had dawned gray and was probably going to stay that way.

It had taken him a long time to find the house—not too big, perched on a small hill, everything on one floor. Taken longer to find the people who took care of it for him—Cassie and Cathy, the sisters who had graduated with B.Sc. degrees to find no one interested in their services.

Also having graduated *cum laude* from a no-nonsense mother's course in domesticity, they'd said to hell with it and gone into the house care business. Hard work and clever ad-

vertising had given them thirty employees and identical Mercedes to drive while supervising them.

And Hopewell, who took care of the grounds. Forced out at fifty-two in a famous corporation's downsizing, he'd also said to hell with it and put a lifetime's hobby of gardening to good use. No fat corporate salary, but he was doing something he liked far more, with the added benefits of being leaner, tanner, and healthier than the harried, pasty-faced executives he'd left behind, many of whom were courting heart attacks worrying when their ouster would come.

Time I said to hell with it. Can't take care of either the inside or outside of a house, but I'll find something.

Spocker probably didn't realize why he was throwing so much his way lately. Just another of Beckett's quirks, like keeping odd hours, spending a lot of time in the office at night and wandering in and out during the day. Got him into trouble now and then, to be defended by the now-retired Tolley. Still, they'd offered him Tolley's job as chief. He'd turned it down. Going out as captain of detectives was fine.

No regrets about that. No regrets about leaving Lee Jordan in Spocker's hands, either.

The phenom of the county's construction business, Jordan had naturally been connected to the political hierarchy, namely Sam Pierce. Could be political pressure somewhere down the line. Interesting to see how Spocker handled it.

That, and wanting to avoid Pierce because of Toni Ewing. Sam's mistress now if rumor was to be believed.

Seen with him at all the important social functions since she'd returned to take care of Crystal Carpenter, the former diva now confined to a wheelchair. Special relationship between those two.

Dammit, if she felt she had to return, fine. She didn't have to rub salt into old wounds.

Door chimes wakened him to a gray noon and Gina Dalmaccio pressing the button with a gloved finger; brown hair stirred by a stiff wind scouring the valley, the electric blue of her down coat emphasizing high-boned, cosmeticless cheeks white with cold. Tall, brown-eyed, always looked as though she was modeling whatever she was wearing.

"Better ask me in before I freeze into a lawn ornament, captain."

Beckett held the door wide. "Maybe I should leave you out

there. An Italian Venus would look better than a miniature Mexican with a burro."

"*Italian Venus?* Only in my mother's eyes." Her own scanning like radar, she followed him into the kitchen. First time she'd been here, Beckett realized.

"I'll make coffee," he said.

She pulled off her gloves. "Let me. You shave. I hate explaining to my friends that the homeless bum they see me with is really my boss."

"I can solve your problem by firing you."

"Okay." She trailed a finger across the counter and inspected it. "I'll go into competition with the two who clean for you and make a great deal more money. Italian women are hell on wheels with a dust-cloth."

Women's intuition combined with a high IQ made her dangerous, thought Beckett. She was already light years ahead of everyone on the squad except Spocker.

When he entered the kitchen shaved and wearing a clean shirt, the coat had been removed, revealing a white sweatsuit that somehow seemed sexy. She poured the coffee.

Beckett picked up his cup. Good. Naturally. "I assume you

didn't stop by to criticize my appearance."

"The lieutenant's idea. Wanted me to bring you up to date and drive you in."

"I'm incapacitated? Phones out of order?"

"I had to come out this way anyway. Jordan's secretary, Julia Buchanan, didn't come in today. Nice to know why."

Beckett finished the coffee. "Tell me the rest as you drive."

"Nothing from the autopsy or Nicholson yet." She glanced at him. "That's one scary forensic person, you know. Down there in that basement surrounded by all that lab equipment, Bach blasting on that sound system of his that must have cost more than the lab. One of these days a corpse will disappear from the morgue, and a week later the lab will have an assistant with electrodes in his neck."

"Suits me. As long as he's kept off-budget."

She downshifted automatically as she corrected a slight skid. "Rumor says you're thinking of retiring."

"Probably because I'll reach twenty-five years next week and I'm getting to be a tired old man."

She studied him for a moment. "Tired yes, captain, but at forty-eight, not old."

She turned into a middle-income apartment complex.

"I always look forward to these things," she said. "Never know what you'll run into."

They ran into an apartment door slightly ajar, silence, and Julia Buchanan, who had been a very attractive blonde, sprawled on the bed in bra and panties, a pair of sheer black panty hose beside the body. If they were to believe what they saw, she'd shot herself in the head with the gun near her hand.

Beckett didn't. In his experience, suicides didn't leave the door open, kill themselves while dressing, or tear apart their apartments beforehand.

Nor was a sixteen-round Sig Sauer automatic a woman's weapon of choice for protection against burglars and rapists. He'd bet the same gun killed Jordan.

Julia Buchanan had shot Jordan, left his body in front of the courthouse, walked five miles home in the bitter cold, been overcome with remorse, and committed suicide. Sure.

Well, there had been that argument in Jordan's office the previous afternoon. Much yelling behind a closed door, Jordan stomping out, Julia weeping, which the speak-no-evil

staff hadn't bothered to mention the first time around, and naturally explained why she hadn't come to work.

Jordan had vanished until he'd turned up dead in his car. Could have been holed up anywhere. In a bar possibly, if the alcohol content of his blood indicated anything. Or the home of a free-drinking friend or associate who had yet to be found.

The autopsy had discovered little else of note. And Nicholson, the forensic genius, had as yet learned nothing from Jordan's clothing and the car that they didn't already know.

Gina, however, after hearing that Julia wrote all the checks for Jordan to sign, muttered *cherchez les books*, which might not be correct French but was clear enough to draft several astute number crunchers from the D.A.'s office into comparing computer printouts of invoices and payments. The electronic revolution hadn't made *that* any easier. Written or keyboarded, numbers were still numbers. They were still at it when night descended. Along with sleet that rattled off windows.

Spocker had concluded that whoever left the car in front of the courthouse couldn't have walked far unless he'd been dressed like Nanook of the North. And even then, would

have needed skates to negotiate the icy sidewalks and streets safely. Jordan acquaintances living within a mile were being interviewed.

Beckett, his hands braced on either side of the window frame again and looking out at a street even more glazed than the night before, thought that Spocker was probably right. The killer had fled to refuge somewhere near in that icy gloom. Could be the hotel two blocks away where more than one person had checked in rather than risk a hazardous drive home and face another in the morning.

Why not look into it himself? He hadn't eaten all day, and he could get a sandwich in the bar.

Kowarski was still at his computer, doing Lord knew what. Davis was on the phone. Probably talking to his wife.

He lifted a hand to his mouth as though eating and waggled his cellular phone in Davis's face as he walked out. Davis nodded.

Gerson, the duty sergeant on the ground floor, shook his head at Beckett's retreating back. Nights the guy should go home, he was here. Nights he should stay here, he went out.

Beckett negotiated the two blocks with a flatfooted, geriatric-type shuffle, found nothing

of interest in the hotel register, and headed for the bar as a small, noisy group spilled out of a conference room.

One of those do-good organization dinner meetings, this one sparsely attended only by those who lived nearby and had slid their way in like Beckett, and a smaller number so devoted to the cause, they'd risk their automobiles and limbs to attend.

A waft of cold air from the door brought a hint of a remembered perfume. Beckett turned to glimpse a distinguished looking, handsome man wearing heavy, dark-rimmed glasses, accompanied by a dark-haired woman in a very elegant, simple black dress.

Sam Pierce. And Toni Ewing.

Tie loose, hat stained and battered, worn lined raincoat open over a wrinkled suit, he felt like holding out a palm and asking for a quarter.

He was no longer hungry. He started back to his office, head down, placing his feet carefully, sleet bombarding him in punishment for venturing where he should never have gone. Pierce owned the hotel, after all.

Across from the courthouse, he lifted his head. The flat marble side faced him. Midway, on the ground floor, the rectangular, lighted sign reading POLICE

was set back at the head of a forty foot walk. Inside were Gerson and the uniformed division, the lighted windows above belonging to the detectives. At that hour the rest of the building was closed, the front angling away into the darkness—wide, marble steps unlit, glass doors locked, lobby dim in the security lights.

He crossed the street slowly.

If the car had arrived at the intersection during the first four or five minutes after the patrol car passed, he'd have been too late to see anyone leaving it.

If, however, it had been parked during the *last* four or five, he'd have almost certainly noticed someone walking away along three of the deserted streets. Three because his angled view of the one in front of the courthouse was limited to about two car lengths. If the driver had walked toward the rear of the car, he'd have been behind the courthouse and out of sight in seconds.

On the corner, he stood staring down the street while the traffic light cycled for cars that weren't there, hands in his pockets, oblivious to the cold and the sleet, wondering just where the driver might have gone. Nothing but the main business district of the town

ahead of him—deserted at ten at night in any weather.

He gingerly cut across the lawn toward the police entrance, crunching through several inches of snow rather than risk the slick sidewalk, some of it ending in his shoes.

Gerson shook his head as he passed. Only Beckett would go for a walk during a sleetstorm.

Spocker, Davis, and Kowarski stood around Gina, who was leafing through an inch-thick stack of computer printouts. She and Spocker followed him into his office. He hung up his coat and hat, shook the unmelted snow from his shoes, and padded toward the desk in wet socks, one with a hole in the toe.

When he settled in his chair, Spocker said, "We could have called you, but we thought we'd let you eat in peace."

Beckett didn't tell them why he'd lost his appetite.

Gina fanned the computer printouts. "This, we think, is why Jordan argued with Julia Buchanan. He found something going on, which might be why he's dead. The number crunchers turned up quite a few invoices from Meridian Contractor's Supply. Nothing to make an outside auditor blink, but I noticed they were all for five thousand, which I thought was unusual, since requirements

have to fluctuate each month—”

There goes that IQ again, thought Beckett. “I asked the bookkeeper for the originals. Stapled to each bill was a delivery receipt with an itemized list. Each list was identical, and the receipts were all signed by a James McNeill, one of the foremen, who says he’s never heard of Meridian Contractor’s Supply. According to the bookkeeper, Julia Buchanan opened the mail and passed on everything that had to be entered into the computer system—”

“I guess those bills never came by mail,” said Spocker. “Buchanan slipped them in with the legitimate ones.”

—we hoped the endorsement on Jordan’s canceled checks would tell us where they’d been deposited. The bookkeeper had them to reconcile the bank statements, but they’d disappeared. Buchanan must have taken them.”

“Explains why her apartment was torn up,” said Spocker. “Someone found them, since we didn’t. So at the moment, all we have is a post office box number, no doubt set up only to embezzle from Jordan.”

“I don’t think she was in it alone,” said Gina; “otherwise, when Jordan found out, it would make more sense for him

to throw *her* out, than storm off who-knows-where. I think she named someone and Jordan went to him to raise hell. Probably said he was going to blow the whistle, which the guy couldn’t afford. So the guy killed him. And then had to get rid of Julia and those checks.”

Beckett clasped his hands behind his head, tilted back, and looked at the ceiling. “How much are we talking about?”

“Total? About sixty thousand.”

“Embezzling that kind of money wouldn’t even get you a trial. The D.A. would settle for a plea bargain with restitution and community service. Not worth killing over.”

Spocker’s head bobbed. “My thought exactly, Hoke. More here than simple embezzlement. I have the feeling we’re being led by the hand. First he leaves Jordan out front last night to be sure we’d go to his office first thing this morning. We find Julia hasn’t shown up. He does such a poor job at faking her suicide that we run back to Jordan’s office to look for a motive for murder. He gives us credit for having the brains to sniff out the embezzlement and the missing canceled checks, which should have been in the apartment if Julia had taken them. But that has to take all day. The banks

would be closed. Morning before we find which has the account and who opened it."

"Giving him almost thirty-six hours' head start," said Gina.

"If he'd ditched Jordan's body, he'd have a great deal more than that."

Beckett half smiled. Spocker was ready.

"If you feel he's counting on your not being able to move until tomorrow, don't play his game. Each of the big commercial banks has a branch here in town or nearby, with the manager's name and phone number on file with the uniforms downstairs in case of emergency."

"Okay, we can get a court order to examine their records," said Gina, "but what sensible bank employee will want to drive in to help us on a night like this?"

"Very few. That's why you take him or her to the bank even if you have to commandeer one of those big salt trucks from the streets department."

She was moving before he finished speaking.

Spocker rose to follow. Beckett held up a hand.

"Since the budget crunch eliminated night lobby security, people who go in or out of the courthouse after hours, like the D.A.'s assistants, no longer use the front doors. They enter

through the police entrance at the side and log in with the desk sergeant—"

Spocker nodded. "The doors are locked at six P.M. and unlocked at six A.M. During those twelve hours, everyone signs in, except certain powers that be. The uniforms also provide a man who keeps an eye on the cleaning people and makes rounds like a watchman. Not that the guy who draws the job complains. Soft duty, summer or winter. They call it the Rent-A-Cop patrol."

"I never bothered to find out, but who has the keys to the building?"

Spocker pointed at the floor. "They're hanging on the duty officer's wall, but I wouldn't swear there are no others. They were never handled like a winning lottery ticket, but who'd want to sneak into the courthouse with the cops in one wing?"

The thought was only half-formed, but—

He waved at the window. "Look out and tell me the fastest way to disappear after parking that car."

Spocker looked. He turned.

"Behind the courthouse." He frowned. "But that's only from someone up here. He still might be seen on the street—unless—" His voice rose. "Into the courthouse?"

"He couldn't walk in through the police entrance without Gerson's seeing him, and to use the front, he'd need the keys. And if he had keys to the front door, he could have keys to the rear ones, so he could have left at any time and no one would have seen him at all." Beckett rubbed an unshaven jaw. "Except maybe the Rent-A-Cop patrol. And if it was someone the cop was used to seeing in the building, he'd have thought nothing of it."

Spocker was gone, moving fast toward the stairs that led down to Gerson's desk.

Oblivious to everything, like time itself, the courthouse clock announced midnight to anyone who might care.

The judge Gina called for a court order had told her she had a helluva nerve disturbing him on a night like this, that crime had come to a standstill like everything else, and that she could see him in his office in the morning—if he made it in.

So Kowarski, who Beckett was sure was born with a DOS in his head, volunteered to try tapping into the computer of the largest bank. Illegal, of course, but they weren't seeking evidence, only information

that would be available in the morning.

And sat grinning in triumph.

The account for Meridian Contractor's Supply had been opened by Sam Pierce. The computer screen showed not just the five thousand that would come from Jordan's company but nine similar deposits. Monthly. As regularly as the courthouse clock kept time. Multiplied by the months the account had existed, the total was almost seven hundred thousand dollars. Not that it had been allowed to accumulate. Leaving just the minimum required to keep the account open, the money had been transferred each month to a bank in the Bahamas.

That part had been easy. Finding out who contributed the other deposits would have to wait until the next day.

After the maintenance people had left at nine, the Rent-A-Cop patrol had wandered around in the dark, silent courthouse, wisely keeping out of Gerson's sight to avoid being sent out into the bitter cold for one reason or another.

Several of the assistant D.A.'s had still been working at eleven. Earlier, perhaps at ten, the light had been on in Commissioner Pierce's office. The cop did not enter. The wisdom that made him avoid Gerson

also told him a lowly patrolman avoided any contact whatsoever with the county's most powerful politician. The office was dark at eleven.

Spocker rubbed the back of his neck. "Political payoffs? Sam Pierce? I can't believe it."

Neither could Beckett.

He'd known Pierce since he'd been a patrolman and Sam a committeeman. Had even counted him a friend until their careers had slowly moved them apart. Not his style to have opened that bank account, shaken down ten businesses, and killed Jordan and his secretary. Not likely that knowing the president of the country well enough to have him as a houseguest had bred an arrogance so huge he thought he could get away with anything. Nor was it likely that through the years he'd become so stupid as to leave a trail so broad.

"He could have been set up," he said.

Gina forced her drooping eyelids open. "Waste of time. Pierce could destroy a frame faster than it could be built."

Beckett felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather outside. He reached for his phone, started to dial, and hesitated. Not a time to make a mistake. He punched the intercom button and dialed Gerson.

"Do you have a car anywhere near Sam Pierce's house?"

"Nothing near anywhere except the garage, captain. It's changed to freezing rain out there. We called them all in to have chains put on. Can't drive tonight without them."

He'd wanted Spocker to walk away with all the credit, but if he was wrong, Spocker would find himself dodging criticism instead of accepting congratulations. Not good for a man recommended to take over.

"Get one ready for me," he snapped.

Gerson sighed. Only Beckett—

Chains barely digging into the hard ice on the road, the car rumbled along at a steady twenty-five through a world that appeared to be shrink-wrapped in ice, every surface glossed, tree limbs sagging, power lines drooping. Good that Sam Pierce didn't live far out on one of those dipping, curving two-lane roads. Even with chains he'd be in a ditch before he got there.

"I wish you'd explain what we're doing out here in this mess, captain," said Gina.

He'd wanted to go alone, but Spocker had been adamant—not on a night like this. Not worth arguing over.

"You said it's difficult to set up someone like Sam. You're right. But a dead man can't defend himself."

"Oh—my—God."

"Exactly. Spocker felt we were being led along, right up to not being able to find that account and a name until morning. But suppose Sam Pierce kills himself during the night, and then his name turns up on the account? Ready-made solution. What we thought would make no difference. It would end there. One of those cleaning-his-gun accidents. Don't smear a dead man."

The rumbling seemed to acquire the one-note, dirgelike quality of funeral drums.

He turned into Pierce's driveway. Ostentation didn't fit the role Sam played. By Meridian standards, the house was relatively modest—old, brick, a converted carriage house on one side and a porte cochere at the front door for guests arriving in inclement weather.

A car there now. Beckett semi-skated across thirty feet of ice-covered driveway to the dry pavement and touched the hood. Still warm.

Lighted by a lamp on either side, the front door was at the head of a small flight of steps. The ground floor windows to the right were dark, those to

the left dim with light spilling from a room at the rear.

"It looks as though they're in Sam's study at the back," he said. "Give me a minute to get around there, then lean on the bell. The room has french windows that open on a terrace. When they let you in, open one for me. If everything is fine, I'll handle the explanations."

"Be careful, captain. Easy to fall and get hurt."

"Captains are experts at walking on ice. Just remember that whoever owns that car might have killed twice and intends to kill again. He'll know you're not here because you enjoy driving on a night like this, and he could decide one more body won't matter."

Two steps and he was in trouble . . . ice coating wet and very slick . . . too thick to break through . . . no traction at all . . . if the lawn had been sloped, he'd have skidded to the bottom . . . rain pelting and biting like embers . . . arms flailing like a beginner on roller skates, he shuffled, slipped, skidded, and cursed his way around the house . . . soaked and half-frozen before clawing his way up the slippery terrace steps on all fours, hauling himself to his feet by clutching a door handle . . . passing a hand over the rain-streaked glass.

The gauzelike curtains over the french doors hazed the view of the bright room, but luckily kept anyone from seeing out. . . .

No more than four feet inside, Pierce's large desk sat at a right angle . . . in his chair, hands clasped on the desktop, Pierce in profile stared straight ahead. . . .

JUMPING BLUE HAMMERS OF HELL!

Frame out of a horror movie . . . standing alongside Pierce and facing Beckett, a short, half-bald man held a revolver to Pierce's head . . . his own half turned toward the insistent ringing of the bell generated by Gina's finger . . . deterred for a moment from the leisurely staging of a suicide because anyone with the nerve to ring Pierce's doorbell at that hour wouldn't leave . . . widower Pierce's half-deaf, live-in housekeeper would be stirring herself to answer.

No time now to stage the suicide . . . impossible to walk away and expect Pierce to keep quiet . . . only one option . . . kill Pierce . . . clamp the gun in his hand . . . hysterically claim he tried but couldn't prevent the tragedy . . .

. . . turning back to Pierce, lips thinned in decision.

Frozen by the rain, numbed by the scene, Beckett fumbled

his gun out, reached with his left hand to tap the door sharply. As the man's head lifted in surprise, the gun muzzle leaving Pierce's head involuntarily, Beckett smashed a pane with his own and shot him.

And lost his footing. Legs flailing like a comedian staging a pratfall, frantically clawing for the door handle to stay erect . . . suddenly tackled by a soft body that loomed out of the night, momentum sliding them across the wet ice coating the terrace. Like a pair of misdirected human hockey pucks, they caromed off a huge stone urn and down the sharp-edged steps.

The perfume told him who his assailant was before Gina rolled away. "Sorry, captain. Slipped—are you all right?"

Beckett gritted his teeth. "Wonderful. I think you've broken my leg."

Worried that he'd fallen, she'd jammed the bell with a pin and come around to see for herself. Spocker spent the day tearing up her resignations as fast as she submitted them, just as he had when she blamed herself when Beckett had been shot a year ago. Look on the good side, she told herself. She was mak-

ing progress. At least this time it hadn't been life-threatening.

Clean break of the tibia; just another medical statistic generated by what was already being called The Great Ice Storm. If he'd been nineteen, they'd have put the cast on and sent him home. Tomorrow for him. On crutches. Nothing to do now but lie there and think.

The man he'd shot might not recover at all. Either way, *he'd* never go home again.

Before leaving to stand vigil at his bedside, Pierce passed on what he'd been told while the gun was held to his head. All news to him, he said. He'd known nothing about it.

Alex Denner had been Pierce's private secretary for ten years, long enough for people to accept that he always spoke for Pierce. When he told selected people Pierce had helped at some time in the past that Pierce expected them to pay five thousand a month to Meridian Contractor's Supply, they took it as a delayed quid pro quo. Not one was indignant enough to call Pierce to protest. Or couldn't get through, since Denner screened all of Pierce's calls.

He'd told Julia Buchanan that Jordan knew and wanted it kept quiet. She assumed that was the way it was done. But Jordan was an honorable man.

When he found out, he met Denner at the courthouse and they drove to Denner's house, where Denner tried to convince him it was Pierce's idea. Jordan still insisted on seeing Pierce, so Denner shot him when he got into the car. Since he had to pick up his own at the courthouse, he drove there and left the car in the street.

Panic. Now he had to get rid of Julia Buchanan. And then he'd gone to Pierce. A bit incoherent, Pierce said. Something like having nothing to worry about if everybody thought Pierce had committed suicide.

Afternoon before Pierce showed up, grief in his voice.

"He's gone. I can't tell you how bad that makes me feel, Hoke. Very few people I trust, but I had no doubts about Alex Denner at all."

Pierce shook his head. "Obviously I gave him too much power. Never thought he'd abuse it. All I can do now is return the money with my apologies, and as far as you're concerned—" He held out his hand. "Not payment enough, Hoke, but you'll come for dinner when you get off the crutches."

Beckett hesitated. "I think not, Sam."

"Ah. Thinking of Toni Ewing. Frankly, I don't understand either of you. Hell, there isn't anyone in the county who

doesn't know about you two, yet when we saw you in the hotel the other night both of you pretended you'd gone blind."

Hoke said nothing.

"Now, that's a subject I'm very familiar with, Hoke." Pierce removed his glasses and polished them with a handkerchief. "Ever hear of retinitis pigmentosa? Gradual deterioration of sight, particularly in dim light. No one questioned Alex driving me about during the day. That was business. But I haven't been able to drive at night for some time, and there are evening social functions I must attend. I couldn't afford my enemies whispering I'd become so big-headed I needed a full-time chauffeur. I also can't afford to let anyone know about my eyes until after the fall election. Not vanity, Hoke. Practical politics. Any sign of weakness could cost dearly."

"Did Alex know about your eyes?"

"Not even him—" Pierce paused. "Just Toni. When I ran into her at one of Crystal Carpenter's afternoon soirees, I made a deal. If she drove me around, everyone would assume she was my date, if you want to use that term. Gave her a bit of social life and me a very attractive chauffeur."

He replaced the glasses. "Don't believe all you hear, Hoke." He paused at the door. "That weird brain of yours should have told you that Crystal Carpenter could hire an army of tea brewers, drink pourers, and wheelchair pushers. Toni had more than one reason to come back." He pointed a finger. "I owe you, but don't irritate me. Dinner. You bring Toni."

Sleepless hours taking their toll, Beckett's eyes drifted closed, thoughts that had been born the moment he'd recognized the man last night before refusing to rest.

Never expected it to be Denner—the perfect assistant for a domineering man like Pierce; quiet, self-effacing, doing only what he was told to do, not clever enough to stage what had gone on. Beckett could see him following Pierce's directions, right up until . . .

. . . and that was where Beckett's mind stumbled.

Well, Denner wasn't stupid, and the worm could turn. Whatever. He could have realized—as Beckett did—that with all signs pointing to Pierce, if Pierce died the investigation would be over and the money his . . . but would mean that Pierce was responsible . . .

Might explain why he never left Denner's bedside. Any last

words could be very important to him.

Might also be Beckett's over-active imagination, based on his opinion that Pierce was smoother and slicker than that lawn of his had been last night, and a perpetual candidate for the Pinocchio of the Year Award.

He sensed someone enter the room, the fragrance of a famil-

iar perfume sending the churning thoughts chasing after the now-departed ice storm.

Nothing to be done except hope that staring death in the face had converted Pierce. Extreme mental or physical trauma had a way of straightening out a man's thinking.

Even a broken leg could make one realize he'd been a fool.

FICTION

COPPERHEAD JACK MEETS THE GANGSTERS

Stuart R. Ball



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Copperhead Jack and I were sitting in Joe's place, taking up table space and staying out of the sun, when the city slickers came in. I knew they were city slickers because of the way they were dressed. One had those low-cut Italian shoes, and his socks had picked up little cockleburrs. The other one wore a pair of sunglasses that probably cost more than my pickup. They walked up to the bar and asked Joe for a drink.

"Coors," said Mr. Cocklebur as he reached down to pick a few off his socks. As Joe handed them their drinks, Cocklebur flicked a few of the burs away and looked around the room with an I-hate-hick-towns expression. Joe looked at me and Jack over their shoulders and gave us his I-hate-foreigners expression. To Joe, anyone across the county line is a foreigner.

The pair came over and asked if they could sit with us. I didn't see why they wanted to, since every other table in the place was empty. Jack told them to suit themselves, and they sat down carefully like they were afraid the chairs would wrinkle their suits.

The two started up a conversation about the weather, and how nice the town was. I knew they'd wander around and eventually get to what they really wanted to know. Pretty soon one of them asked if we'd seen any strangers around. Jack played it pretty dumb.

"Strangers?" he asked. "Like who?"

"Just strangers. We're looking for a buddy of ours. He came back here to get away from it all, and we want to surprise him."

I knew who they were talking about. Another city type had come through a few days ago and rented Joe's hunting cabin. He wanted it all kept real secret. We didn't much care what secret he had. Folks around here keep pretty much to themselves.

"Well, there is one stranger around here. Rented a hunting cabin a couple of days ago," Jack replied.

"We would certainly like to go there and surprise him. How far away is this cabin?"

I started to say it was about an hour's walk, but Jack put his foot on top of mine and pressed down real hard. "Takes about two days to hike there," Jack said.

The one with the sunglasses finally spoke. "What would you charge to take us up there?" he asked. "We'd need a guide."

Jack thought a minute. I guessed he was trying to estimate how much these guys were worth per day. "About a hundred dollars a day," he finally said. "Each."

Cocklebur took out a wad of bills, peeled off two and handed one to me and one to Jack. "A hundred each now, the rest when we get to the cabin," he said.

"Plus expenses," Jack said. Two more bills changed hands.

Jack stuck out his hand. "I'm Copperhead Jack," he said, "and this here's my partner, Billy." He said it like we'd been partners for more than the last ten seconds. "Looks like we have a deal, Mr.—"

"Smith," said Mr. Cocklebur. "And this is Mr. Jones." We all shook hands, and Jack said we'd go over to the general store to get some supplies and we could start right after lunch. We turned to go, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mr. Jones wipe his hand on his pants.

I was a little worried about Jack. He's a pretty decent sort, for these parts, but that wad of cash was big enough to even make the Right Reverend Baxter look twice. I was afraid Jack might have something criminal in mind, so once we were outside, I asked him what he was doing. "You know that hunting cabin isn't any two day hike," I told him.

"Yeah, but we can't get two hundred dollars each for an easy walk. We'll lead 'em around in the woods for a couple of days. By the time they figure out they've been had, we'll be gone."

"You know they're up to no good," I told him.

"Probably."

We went to the store and stocked up on supplies. When we got back to where Smith and Jones were waiting, they were taking some hiking boots and coats from the trunk of their car. They each had a leather case, about the right size for one of those expensive foreign guns. I was only a little worried about that. I didn't have a gun, but I figured Jack probably had a derringer in one boot and a knife in the other, him being Jack and all.

As soon as those two had laced up their expensive boots, we started out, down the trail behind Joe's place that leads to his still. We went past the still; then Jack took off down a game trail. We spent all afternoon making pretty good time in the direction that led directly away from the cabin.

When Jack finally stopped, we were in a small clearing. Jack built a fire, and I made supper. About dark, when the mosquitoes were getting pretty thick, Jack opened his backpack and took out one of those little packages of towels wetted with mosquito repellent. He opened one and handed it to me, then opened one for

himself and wiped down his arms and face with it. I took a couple to give to Smith and Jones. Jack grabbed my hand and shook his head. I looked over at them, sitting with their backs to us. Every few seconds one of them swatted a mosquito. I felt kind of sorry for those two. They were going to be miserable tomorrow.

After we ate, Jack threw a log on the fire, and we watched the flames for a while. I heard a deer run through the woods off to our left.

"What was that?" asked Smith.

"Grizzly," Jack said. I choked back a fit of laughing.

"Grizzly bear?" asked Jones.

"Yep. We get them around here from time to time. They get mighty hungry this time of year, but they won't bother you if you don't get too far from the fire." With that, Jack lay back with his head on a log, pulled his hat over his eyes, and laced his hands over his chest. Smith and Jones lay down to sleep, looking nervously around at the trees. I heard a squirrel jump between two tree branches, and both Smith and Jones jumped, then moved in a little closer to the fire. Jack picked that time to lift his hat off his eyes.

"Oh, by the way," he said. "You boys watch out for rattlesnakes. They like the way the fire warms the rocks, and sometimes they'll crawl into your coat. So don't get *too* close to the fire."

The next morning neither Smith nor Jones looked like he'd slept. Smith complained about his feet, which had swollen overnight and wouldn't fit in his boots. He managed to force them, but he walked like a foundered horse for the first half mile. Jack started a big circle back toward the cabin, and we eventually came to Crick's Creek. Jack stopped at the edge, where a log lay across a fifty foot ravine with the river gurgling below.

"We have to cross on *that*?" said Smith.

"If you want to get to the cabin we do," Jack replied. I had figured out what he was up to, so I didn't bother to ask him why we didn't cross a few hundred feet upstream where there was a proper bridge.

"One at a time," said Jack. "That log's kind of old."

Smith and Jones swatted at mosquitoes while Jack crossed over and I followed. "Come on," said Jack. Smith went first and managed okay. Jones did all right until he was about one step from the end. Then he slipped and went right while the log went left. He caught a tuft of grass that was growing on the side as the log fell fifty feet and landed in the water with a splash. The grass

started pulling out by the roots, but Jack caught his arm and hauled him up over the edge. His knees seemed to be shaking some as we started out again.

"How much farther?" Smith wheezed after a couple of hours. He looked really tired, and I felt sorry for him again.

"'Bout halfway up that hill," Jack said, pointing. We walked on, and the only sounds were Smith and Jones, breathing hard and swearing when they tripped over a root or something. Eventually we could see the cabin through the trees.

"Hold it here," said Jones. Jack leaned against a tree while they opened those cases. As I'd thought, they had guns in there. They were the expensive kind, with silencers like in the movies.

"You won't need those," said Jack when they started to attach the silencers.

"What do you know, hillbilly?" sneered Smith.

"I know there isn't anyone within ten miles to hear a shot."

Smith suddenly swung his gun around and pointed it at Jack. "Okay, hillbilly," he said. "You and your partner go up to that cabin and knock on the door. One funny move and I'll blow your hick head off."

Jack shrugged, and the four of us started up to the cabin. Smith and Jones draped their coats over their guns, but they were pointed at our backs all the way. Jack didn't seem to mind much, but my back kept itching and I had to keep telling myself what I was going to do with that money we were making for all this. Smith and Jones had looked kind of funny before, but they seemed real professional now, like they'd done this a hundred times. When we got to the cabin, Smith and Jones threw away their coats and took positions on either side of the door. Smith motioned for Jack to knock on the door. No one answered. Smith reached over and tried the doorknob, finding the door unlocked. He pushed it open a crack, then he held his finger to his lips and motioned with his gun barrel for me and Jack to go inside. As soon as we stepped in, Smith and Jones came through the door real fast, pointing their guns all around the room. The place was empty.

"Where is he?" Smith demanded.

"How should I know?" Jack replied. "This is a hunting cabin. Maybe he went hunting."

"We'll wait," said Jones as he scratched at a mosquito bite on the back of his gun hand. Smith rubbed at the place where a tree branch had whacked him in the eye. I had quit feeling sorry for

them some time ago. We waited maybe an hour before we heard a voice outside.

"Hello in the cabin," it said.

"Who's that?" asked Smith.

"Looks like Sheriff Brady," I said as I peeked out a window.

"Answer the door," Jones demanded. Jack opened the door when Brady knocked, with Jones hiding behind the door and holding his gun about three inches from Jack's head.

"Howdy, sheriff," Jack said.

"Jack. You guys seen any strangers around here?"

"Nope. No one here but me and Billy. We're doing a little squirrel hunting."

"That's funny. Joe said you left with two strangers. Where are they?"

Smith stepped into view, pointing his gun at Brady's face. "We're right here," he said. He motioned with his gun for Brady to come inside.

"You two are under arrest," Brady said uncertainly. He stepped inside and raised his hands.

"Arrest this!" Smith said as he pulled the trigger. The gun clicked. Smith swore and worked the slide, ejecting the shell, then tried again, with the same result.

Jack reached into his shirt pocket. "If you boys want to shoot somebody, you'll be needin' your firing pins," he said, and tossed them on the floor. He looked at the surprised Jones and shrugged. "I took 'em out while you were asleep."

Sheriff Brady grinned and drew his own gun. Smith and Jones only needed one look at the business end of Brady's .44 magnum and they couldn't get their hands up fast enough.

"Who are these two?" I asked.

"Hit men from Chicago," Brady explained as he handcuffed them together. "They came here to kill an accountant who ran off with some mob records."

"You going to make us walk all the way back to town with these handcuffs on?" asked Smith.

"Nope," said Brady. "My car's just down the hill there. There's a couple of FBI men back in town that want to talk to you. Your accountant friend is with them."

Jones looked at Smith. "Just how far away is town, sheriff?" he asked.

"A mile or so up the road."

Jones gave Jack a look that would have scared me spitless if he'd still been holding a gun. "I should have killed you when I had the chance," he said.

"You'd better worry about your own hide," Brady said. "After the federal boys get through with you, we'll see about bringing you back here to stand trial for the attempted murder of a peace officer."

"My gun wouldn't fire. You'll never get a conviction," Smith said confidently.

"Don't be too sure," Brady said with a sideways wink at me and Jack. "Mistrials don't happen in *my* county." Smith turned white. I guessed he was planning right then to tell the FBI about every murder he'd ever committed, just so there'd be a string of trials to keep him out of Brady's jail.

"You know, Jack," said Brady, "when Joe told me that you two had gone off with these guys, and then the FBI came looking for them, I was a little worried."

"I'm mighty touched over your concern, sheriff," said Jack.

"It wasn't you I was worried about. I was afraid the FBI wouldn't get these two back in one piece. You and Billy need a ride back to town?"

"Nope. We'll walk."

FICTION

ST. NICK

Jeremiah Healy

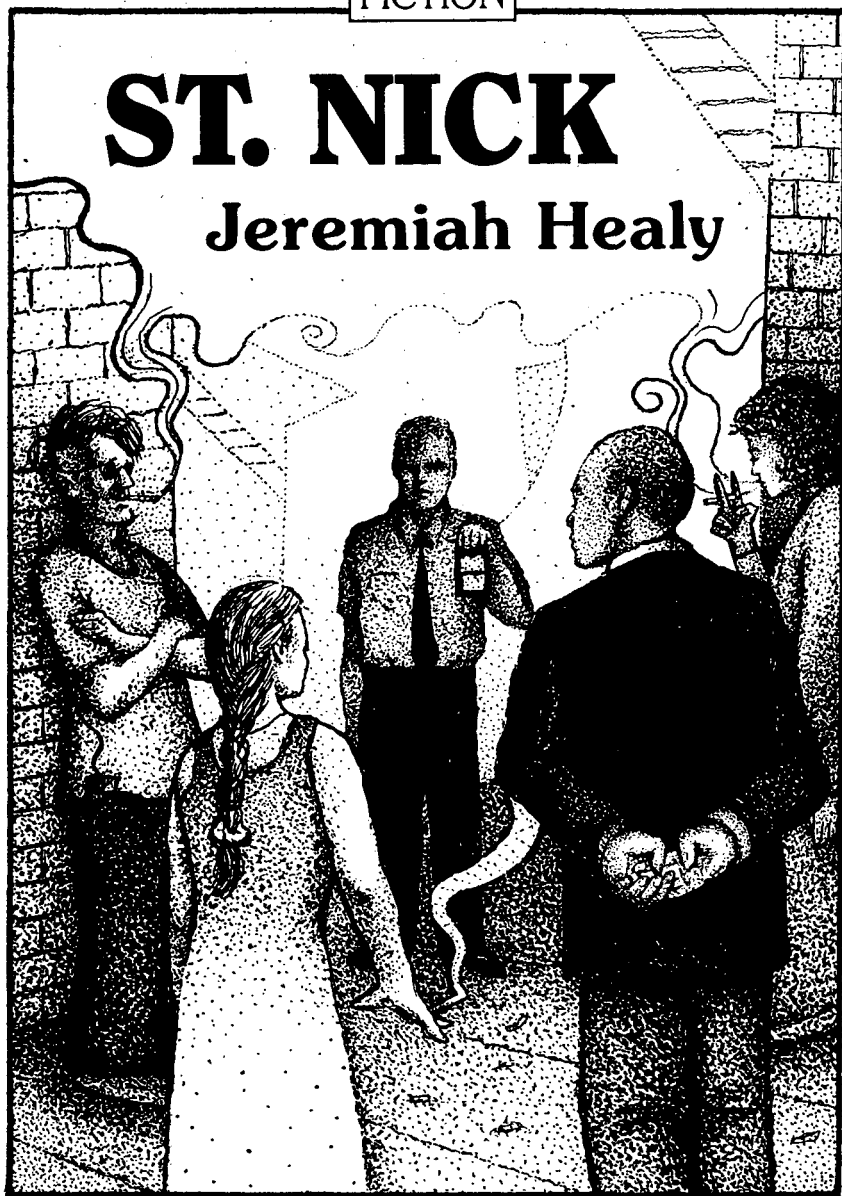


Illustration by Mark Penta

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“**M**r. Cuddy?” Standing behind my desk, I said, “Yes. Ms. Nucci?”

“Right.” She carefully closed the old fashioned wooden door with the pebbled-glass panel reading JOHN FRANCIS CUDDY, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS. About five foot two in low heels, Bernadette Nucci wore a wool skirt and blazer despite the ninety degree August heat baking Boston Common outside my windows. I had the impression she’d dressed in the best outfit she owned. She was about twenty years old, and her somber attitude didn’t match her nice tan any more than her clothes did the weather.

I gestured to one of the two client chairs in front of my desk. “Please.”

Nucci moved awkwardly to the chair, as though she were more used to working in an office than visiting one. “Like, I really appreciate your seeing me on just a phone call.”

I sat back down. “That’s usually how people find me. What’s on your mind?”

Nucci twisted the strap of her handbag that lay in her lap. “A friend of mine—well, not exactly a friend, I guess, but this woman I, like, know at... *knew* at work, she got killed last week.”

“What happened?”

“Somebody... she was on her way home, walking from the trolley, and got... strangled.”

“In Allston?”

“That’s right. Mary Kohl.”

I’d read about it. Kohl left one of the Green Line commuter trolleys that wend their way westward from downtown toward the more residential sections. Her body had been found in an alley.

I said, “The newspaper story didn’t mention any witnesses.”

Nucci, still twisting the strap, seemed to focus on the ashtray at her side of my desk. “I... like, would it be okay if I smoked?”

“Go ahead.”

She opened the clasp on her bag, took out a soft-pack of green and white cellophane, and lit up using a slim lighter. I’ve never smoked myself, but when you’re in a service industry, you’re better off making allowances for the clients who do.

A deep drag, then a breath that sounded more relaxed. “St. Nick.”

“I’m sorry?”

“St. Nick. Nicotine. That’s what we call ourselves. The Society of St. Nick.”

“Who’s we?”

“Me and the other people at the Pickard Company who smoke. You ever heard of Arthur Pickard?”

"No."

"Well, he 's the boss, founded the place, and he doesn't allow smoking in the building. Or even in front of it. We all have to, like, go outside in the back, so nobody has to smell the smoke. Only thing is, it's like a wind tunnel down there, so your cigarette burns faster than you can smoke it."

Which might be what Mr. Pickard had in mind. "I'm not sure I follow why you're here."

Nucci grew even more somber. "I was away on vacation when Mary got killed. I come back, and it like hits me. Maybe she's dead because of the Society."

"Of St. Nick."

"Right, right. I mean, she'd only been working with us for a while, and she turns out to be a smoker, so I tell her to come down with me to the chapel—that's what we call the wind tunnel?"

"The Chapel of St. Nick."

"Right." Nucci took another puff. "Kind of... what's the word?"

"The word?"

"For like calling it a chapel and all."

"Irreverent, maybe?"

"Irreverent, right, right. Irreverent. Look, I don't want to give you the wrong idea or anything. I was brought up Catholic, real strict, the nuns and no

boys and everything, even in this day and age."

Nucci had an odd way of mixing phrases from what might have been her grandparents' generation with the universal "like" of her own. "Why do you think Ms. Kohl's death might be related to your smoking group?"

Nucci stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray, smoke coming up from her nostrils. "I don't. I mean, like, I can't prove anything. That's why I'm coming to you."

"Have you been to the police?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Since I was on vacation when it happened, they never talked to me, and I don't really have anything to tell them."

"But you think you have enough to tell me."

"Maybe if you... look, I don't know how this is supposed to work, right? I mean, on TV the people go to Magnum or Rockford and he like takes it from there. But maybe if you heard me out, you'd be able to tell me."

• She seemed sincere, and nice, and I didn't have a hell of a lot else to do. "Okay."

Nucci lit another cigarette. "It's like this. I'm a secretary at Pickard, they distribute fixtures for retail stores—the

things you'd hang pocketbooks and stuff from?"

"With you so far."

"Well, we have this big warehouse out in Framingham, but Mr. Pickard, he's always had the office downtown, so that's where it stays. I've only been with the company like two years, but it didn't take two days to know that what Mr. Pickard wants, Mr. Pickard gets."

"And Mr. Pickard wanted a no-smoking policy."

"Right, right. There were only a few of us who smoked, and a couple of them gave it up. The only ones in the Society are me, Donnell Willups, Cassie Carmody, and Billy Danvers. And, of course, Mary."

"Can you spell those for me?"

Nucci did. "And Mary's last name is . . . was . . . K-o-h-l, not C-o-l-e."

"Got it."

She drew some more smoke into her lungs. "Anyway, Mr. Pickard started the policy at the beginning of the summer, so like three months ago. We ranked on it at first, but to be honest, it worked out kind of cool."

Cool. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the chapel itself is pretty grungy. I mean, it's just an opening between the buildings that overlooks this alley, and the derelicts sometimes

come up and try to bum a cigarette off you. But the policy kind of mixes together people who wouldn't spend time together much, you know?"

"So you get to know each other better?"

"Right, right. Like, up in the office, it'd be 'Mr. Willups,' because he's the vice president of operations. He smokes these horrendous Turkish cigars. I never worked for him or anything, but in the chapel he can call me Berny and I can call him Don and it's like just . . . natural, that's all."

"How about the others?"

"Cassie's good, too. Kind of tough, but I guess you have to be, you're in sales with this economy and all. Billy, he runs the mailroom. Kind of a space-shot, all the time wearing his Walkman and listening to classic rock."

"But you all got along well together?"

"Yeah. I mean, just in the chapel. We never, like, got together outside work. But then Mary started oh, maybe three weeks ago, and something happened."

"What?"

"I don't know. I just know the first day I met her, she asked me about where you could smoke, and I like told her, 'Follow me.' We went down to the

chapel, and the other guys were already there."

"Willups and Danvers."

"And Cassie, too. I was kind of late, actually. Mr. Pickard lets us have ten fifteen to ten thirty and three fifteen to three thirty, and that's it, except for what you can scoff during your lunch hour sometimes, which is what I'm doing here right now."

"Mary Kohl about your age?"

"Oh no. She was almost Don's age, and he's got to be nearly as old as you are."

"Thanks. How about Carmody and Danvers?"

"Cassie's maybe thirty. Billy's a year younger than me."

"Which makes him . . ."

"Eighteen and a half."

I almost smiled at the last part, Nucci still keeping track of age in less-than-yearly chunks. "Go ahead."

"Well, it's that first day, like I said, and Mary and me are walking up to the other three, and Billy says something funny."

"You mean funny as in odd?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"I didn't really catch it, exactly. It was something like, 'What do you know, here comes Mary.'"

"And that seemed odd to you?"

"Yeah. On account of he didn't say it just like that. It was weird and I didn't know what to think, then Mary smiled and said, 'It's okay, don't worry about it.'"

"Worry about what?"

"I couldn't tell. And I didn't want to ask her, since it was her first day and all."

"Her first day is when you first met her?"

"Right, like I said."

"Then how did Billy Danvers know to call her Mary?"

"She got introduced around before that. It's not so big an operation downtown, maybe thirty, thirty-five of us, tops."

"Ms. Nucci, I still don't see what you want me to do."

"Well, the cops have had it—Mary's case, I mean—for like a week now, and nothing's happening. I didn't know her all that well, but she just went through a divorce and has two little kids, and it doesn't seem right nobody's still trying to find out who killed her."

"The police don't much like it when a private investigator butts into an open homicide."

"Well, if they're not doing anything more about it, then why can't you?"

Nucci had already been convinced by her own reasoning.

I said, "It's not very likely that I'll find out something the police haven't."

"Does that mean you'll try?"

I blew out a breath that moved some of the cigarette smoke around the room. "I don't work for free."

"I didn't think you did. I still live at home, so I've got some money saved I didn't spend on my vacation." The sheepish grin again. "Fact is, my family . . . I like took the vacation with my folks this year. Grandmother, cousins, everybody in this one big house at the beach."

I quoted her half my usual rate. She blinked but opened the handbag again.

As Bernadette Nucci fished out a checkbook, I said, "Have you told anybody else you were coming to see me?"

"No."

"Good. Don't."

"How come?"

"I want to look into things without people knowing you sent me after them."

"So, if I see you at work, I should make out like I never met you before?"

"That would be good, yes."

"**M**y lucky day." "Lieutenant." "I can't give you but ten minutes, Cuddy, and I'll be stealing that from a drive-by came in an hour ago."

Robert Murphy closed the folder on his desk, making the little American flag stuck in his pen holder wave a bit from the breeze. I sat down across from him. Husky and black, Murphy was decked out in a longsleeved white shirt, flowered tie, and collar stay.

Since he never bothers to get up to shake hands, I can't comment on his pants.

I said, "They're shooting each other in broad daylight now?"

"Summertime. Nights are too short for all the killing they want to do."

"What happens when these hijinks spread outside Dorchester and Roxbury?"

"Then maybe you white folks'll start paying attention, appropriate less money for the tourists and more for the homeboys."

"You think it'll happen?"

"What, the gangs driving outside the 'hood?"

"That's what I mean."

"Someday. And I hope I'm long retired by then. What're you here for?"

"Kohl, Mary. Strangled last week."

"Wednesday."

"Anything?"

"Yeah. The motorman on the trolley happened to remember her. She wasn't a fashion model, but attractive enough. He says she got off with five or

six others at her stop, nothing unusual looking, nobody she seemed to know or be talking to. Then probably an hour later, the daycare lady at her house watching the children gets to worrying that Kohl's not home yet, so she calls 911 just about the time a car almost rolls over the body at the head of an alley."

"How far from the house?"

"Two blocks."

"Sexual?"

"No signs."

"Robbery?"

"Money and credit card still in her wallet."

I thought about it. "She's on her way home from work, it's still pretty light out."

"Not even seven o'clock, from the way the motorman fixes her leaving the trolley line."

"How was she done?"

"Cord, maybe electric cable."

"So no blood, no real weapon to ditch or get caught with . . ."

A grim smile. "You're thinking it's somebody who knew her and we'd look for, right?"

"Not very dramatic for a crazy."

"Wish you wouldn't mention that word. I been praying for a week now we wouldn't find another like your Ms. Kohl."

I said, "Headline: 'Mad Strangler Stalks Hub.'"

"Please. TV reporter sticking a mike in my face, 'Lieutenant,

do you think the average person has anything to fear from this?'"

"So, anybody stand out?"

"From Ms. Kohl's life, you mean?"

"Yes."

Murphy let his eyelids drop to half mast. "You in it for the insurance?"

"No."

"Good. Looks like it'll be all her kids'll have."

"How much?"

"A hundred thousand. Part of the divorce settlement."

"You talked to the ex-husband?"

"Almost."

"You almost talked to him?"

"Uh-uh. Almost ex-husband, on account of they weren't exactly divorced yet."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Kohl, George, gets by her dying what he lost by their divorcing."

"You wouldn't have an address on him?"

"I may be nodding off here, but I don't recall you saying just who it is you're fronting for."

I told him. "Can I poke around?"

A lumbering sigh. "Given Ms. Nucci's probably the only person the decedent knew with an alibi, be my guest. Truth to tell, there's nothing in our jacket on this but a fond hope,

and I don't see how you can tramp on that."

"George Kohl?"

"Who wants to know?"

The man in khaki shorts and a sweat-stained T-shirt rested the box on the stoop of the address Murphy had given me. The stoop belonged to the house in Allston that Mary Kohl had gotten as part of the divorce, Murphy telling me George was moving back in to take care of the children. Kohl was about my age, with thinning brown hair plastered on his head and a gut that pushed the box ahead of him on the stoop.

I took out my I.D. holder.

He read the information carefully. "Private investigator. Now what?"

"I'll try not to take up too much of your time."

"My time. My time. I remember when I used to have a real sense of that concept, you know?"

"Sorry."

"I just about get over the idea of the divorce, of seeing my kids on a schedule, of losing everything I ever worked for to Mary and her shyster lawyer Hitchcock. I even just move into my own place, first time since last year of college I'm going to be living alone. Then this happens."

I nodded toward the door. "Your children inside?"

"Naw. I packed them off to Mary's sister. A vacation on the farm. Seems to make sense to wait until I go pick them up to tell them."

I wasn't sure I agreed, but then I've never been a father.

"Mr. Kohl—"

"And that's not going to be the worst part, you know. The worst part, that's going to be juggling this house and two kids and a job I've already been away from too much because of the divorce hassle. How am I supposed to do all that, huh?"

I thought, the same way your almost-ex was supposed to. "Mr. Kohl, do you know why your wife went to work at the Pickard Company?"

"Yeah. Mary needed the money. I sure as hell don't make enough. Even the judge saw that."

"But she didn't work during the marriage?"

"Just before the kids came. Then after our daughter—the first one, nine years ago—Mary says to me, 'Let's really raise her right, George, no latchkey stuff.' I say fine. So we buy out here in Allston instead of someplace decent, and rot here through another kid—a boy, this time—and a marriage that's crumbling faster than

the old plaster inside. Then she decides it's time to end it."

"End it?"

"Yeah, the marriage. Oh, you thought . . . suicide? Hah, that's a laugh. That's the first good laugh I've had for a week. Mary-Mary-Quite-Contrary committing suicide. Let me tell you, pal, she was the last person I know who'd kill herself."

"Where did your wife work before?"

"This retail store, women's clothes, went out of business a couple, three years ago."

"Which is why she had to go elsewhere."

"Else . . . oh, you mean Pickard's. Yeah, but let me tell you, even if the other store was still around, they wouldn't have taken her back."

"Why not?"

"You never met Mary-Mary, right?"

"Right."

"Well, let me tell you, she was the kind would climb the ladder of success with a knife in her teeth. That knife went into a lot of backs at the old store."

"Anybody in particular?"

"Not that I'd remember. Why all the questions, anyway?"

"I'm just looking into things. Your new place, you going to have to sell it now?"

"Sell it? I never owned it. After Mary-Mary picked me

clean, I was lucky I could afford to rent."

"Lease?"

"No. Month-to-month. The only break I got, seems like."

"Because it's so flexible."

"Huh?"

"Being month-to-month, you could leave the new place whenever."

Kohl bristled. "What're you saying here?"

"I'm saying I think this place bouncing back to you because the divorce wasn't final seems pretty lucky."

"Lucky? Lucky, with God knows what kind of obligations Mary-Mary rang up while she was on the loose? Let me tell you, in this real estate market, a house isn't exactly worth killing for, get me? Especially when it comes equipped with two kids."

I left George Kohl moving back into his house. I didn't envy the children who'd be growing up in it.

Hitchcock did not look much like Alfred. His first name was Joseph, and he was tall and thin, with dishwater blond hair parted precisely over horsey features and a seersucker suit that had seen better days. He didn't seem particularly thrilled to find me waiting by his secretary's desk when he returned from a pretrial confer-

ence at the Probate and Family Court.

"Yes?," the eyebrows arching.

The secretary introduced us, and I asked if I could have a little of his time for a former client.

"Which one?"

"Mary Kohl."

The eyebrows dropped as part of a frown. "Yes. Yes, come in."

Hitchcock's office was big enough but cramped, files and lawbooks piled on chairs and against the wall in teetering stacks. There was one chair empty, and I took that as he moved behind his desk. After flicking through a half-dozen pink message slips, Hitchcock sank into his chair without taking off his suit jacket. "Who is your client, Mr. Cuddy?"

"I promised I wouldn't say."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage that I'm not sure I want to expand for you."

I began looking in a leisurely way around the room, like a tourist on a sightseeing trip.

Hitchcock might have grinned. "I take your point, and I wouldn't care to try throwing you out. What do you want?"

"Any ideas you have on why Mary Kohl was murdered."

A pursing of the lips. "That's easy. None."

"Think about it."

"I have. She was not the most likeable person in the world, but . . . do you understand the attorney-client privilege?"

"Mostly."

"Well then, as you know, the privilege survives the death of the client, but to be frank, there's nothing she told me that could help you. Or the police, who've already spoken to me."

"Robert Murphy."

Another grin. "Are you merely well informed, or also well connected?"

"We've known each other a while. You dealt with the husband on the divorce?"

"Yes. Directly, I'm afraid."

"So he wasn't represented."

"Correct. In this economy, you see it fairly frequently, but I had the feeling that George Kohl was using it more for sympathy with the judge than because he just couldn't pay another attorney's fee."

"Beyond your own, you mean."

"Correct again, and perfectly legitimate. The judge ordered him to pay my fee with full disclosure and ample supporting evidence of Mrs. Kohl's circumstances."

"Which were?"

"Out of the workforce for nearly a decade, two children of tender years to nurture, a house to support. I could go on."

"Do you know how she came to get the job at the Pickard Company?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me?"

Hitchcock played with his tie, a regimental one. "I don't see why not. I knew Arthur—Arthur Pickard—in school, and I called him for her."

"Why?"

"She'd been in retailing, but what with all the mergers and acquisitions and bankruptcies, it's a difficult field to enter. I thought she might have a better chance trading on her experience at the periphery."

"A company that provides fixtures to retail stores."

"Exactly."

"And Pickard himself agreed."

"He agreed to interview Mary. After that, she was on her own."

"Did she ever talk with you about how the job was going?"

Hitchcock seemed to consider something, maybe an aspect of the attorney-client privilege. "Not in so many words. I knew she'd started there, but I didn't get any progress reports."

"From her or from Pickard."

A very precise, "From neither."

"How about George Kohl?"

"How about him?"

"Do you think he'd be capable of this kind of violence?"

"Everyone is capable of it, Mr. Cuddy. Take you, for instance. I have the feeling that you've seen and done your share."

"No argument there."

"Ever been married?"

Thinking of Beth, I paused before saying, "Just once."

"Was the divorce amicable?"

"There wasn't one. My wife died."

"Oh." Something crossed Hitchcock's face. "Oh, I'm sorry, I . . . look, my point was going to be . . . I've been involved in a lot of divorce cases over the years. Would I have been surprised if George Kohl stood up and started throwing things at a settlement conference? No. Would I be surprised to learn he'd lain in wait for his wife and strangled her? Yes. I don't think George ever understood Mary, Mr. Cuddy."

"But you did?"

Attorney Joseph Hitchcock said he had other things to do and would I please leave.

Tulips? Where did you find those this time of year?

I laid them on the grave so the blossoms were toward her headstone. "Mrs. Feeney saw them at the market this morning and stocked a couple of dozen."

They're beautiful, John.

"Then they're appropriate, too."

You seem troubled.

I looked away from the harbor at the foot of her hillside and toward a ballfield. The same one I'd played on growing up, third base beginning in third grade. "New case, Beth."

Tell me about it.

I did.

I feel bad for the woman, but, Jesus, those poor kids.

"I just hope the news they're going to get doesn't get any worse."

If it's the husband, you mean.

"It's somebody, Beth."

What are you going to do next?

"Well, I don't have much to work with, so I thought I'd start at the top."

The next morning I was led into a high-ceilinged office in a prewar building near the harbor, the kind of place that gets supplanted by a forty story glass obelisk every couple of years. Arthur Pickard would have had a nice view of a beautiful sloop if he'd been looking out the window behind him instead of at me taking a seat in front of him.

When the receptionist left us, Pickard said, "I'm seeing you on sufferance, Mr. Cuddy."

Mid-fifties, he was sharp-featured and clear-eyed, the sort who wouldn't be used to backing down and might gnaw off your ankle if you knocked him to the floor. He wore a bow tie and reminded me of a Yankee version of Ross Perot.

I said, "You got a telephone call."

Pickard folded his hands left over right on the blotter. "From Joe Hitchcock. Let's not waste any more of my time than is absolutely necessary."

Which made me wonder why he was letting me waste any of his time at all. "How did Mary Kohl come to work here?"

"Joe said he told you. He called me, I agreed to interview her, and I was sufficiently impressed to offer her a job."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"What impressed you about her?"

Pickard refolded his hands, right over left this time. More expressive, maybe. "She seemed ready to work, ready to learn, and ready to do what was necessary."

"Necessary for what?"

"For getting ahead in this world. You have no idea how many young men and women sit in that chair and hand me impressive resumes without clue one as to how they will get

things done if hired. Mary Kohl was the opposite of that."

I thought about her husband's knife-in-the-teeth comment.

Pickard said, "And then she betrayed me."

I stared at him. "She what?"

"Betrayed me, Mr. Cuddy. She . . . smoked."

He was so serious, you couldn't laugh. "No."

"Yes. There were no nicotine stains on her fingers or her teeth, no smell of it about her, but there it is. Kohl smoked, and I found out about it her first day on the job."

"Is that grounds for firing someone?"

"Not yet. I won't tolerate abuse of drugs or alcohol, nor anything else that could affect the health or well-being of myself or my workers. But I've not yet gone that far with tobacco. As a result of Kohl's betrayal, however, I have instituted a policy of not hiring anyone new who does smoke."

"So, you never asked her during the interview if she did."

A sour face and a refolding of hands again. "No. As I said, there was no . . . objective evidence to cue me on it."

"Where did Ms. Kohl work?"

"Where? I started her in the secretarial pool, just so she would learn the systems faster. She took that positively, agree-

ing with me that it was better to have the fundamentals in hand than her nameplate on a desk. Kohl was someone who could take direction, and in fact Donnell asked me to transfer her to his office."

To protect Bernadette Nucci, I played dumb. "Donnell?"

"Donnell Willups. He served with my son in Vietnam. With distinction. He's worked for me ever since they mustered him out."

"And your son?"

Pickard stopped cold. "My son?"

"Does he work here, too?"

"My son is dead, Mr. Cuddy. He died twenty-two years ago this month, in a tunnel below his base camp near a place called Cu Chi."

The tunnels of Cu Chi, where the Vietcong dug themselves under, around, and through the American troops on the surface. Some of our men, calling themselves "tunnel rats," went down after them. "I'm sorry."

"You're about the right age. Were you there?"

"Not exactly, but near enough. Mostly Saigon."

"You fellows were treated badly, even disgracefully. I hired Donnell more because of that than his being a minority for the stat sheets."

I was sure Willups would be reassured to hear that. "How

long had Mary Kohl been working for him?"

"Less than a week before she died."

"Why did he want her transferred to his office?"

"Ask him. I assume because Donnell saw in her the same things I did, perhaps because they . . . smoked together downstairs. And he needed help."

"Help?"

Pickard paused. "Operations has been . . . slowing down some, with Cassie—Cassie Carmody—doing her job as well as she has. She's throwing more work at Donnell than he can handle."

"You're impressed by Ms. Carmody, too, then?"

"I'm impressed by anyone who can make me money, Mr. Cuddy."

"Does Billy Danvers make you much?"

"Billy performs a necessary task in a competent manner. He can read, he almost knows how to spell, and he occasionally arrives on time. For a worker his age, those attributes amount to a dream come true."

"You seem to know your employees well, Mr. Pickard."

"It's a small company, Mr. Cuddy. But not so small that you should have known about

Billy Danvers without my telling you his name."

"Someone else mentioned him."

"It also seems odd to me that you're here about Mary Kohl, one of the Smoking Club or whatever the hell they call it; that I mentioned two others, Donnell and Cassie; and that you mentioned a fourth without my prompting it. Tell me, does it strike you as even odder that neither of us has mentioned the fifth, Bernadette Nucci?"

Pickard's eyes glittered as he refolded his hands one more time.

I said, "What can you tell me about her?"

He smiled, not a very warming sight. "Why don't you waste Bernadette's time instead of mine? They'll all be down there puffing their brains—or lungs—out in a few minutes."

"You keep track of when your employees do that?"

"I keep track of many things, Mr. Cuddy. Many things. You'd do well to bear that in mind. Good day."

The back of the building was in the shade, the wind nearly howling through the narrow canyon made by the surrounding structures. It wasn't hard to spot the Society of St. Nick.

As I walked toward them, the medium-build black man I took to be Donnell Willups was just reaching into his coat. Bernadette Nucci had already fired up, holding the lighter for a skinny kid with narrow metal headphones in his ears. A striking woman who was the right age to be Cassie Carmody was halfway through a hundred-millimeter filtered job.

I said, "Mr. Pickard told me it would be all right with him if I talked to you all."

Nucci said innocently, "Who are you?"

I showed my I.D. to her first, then the others in turn. The hundred-mil woman said, "Cassie Carmody. Start with me."

A dazzling, if slightly predatory, smile.

I looked away from it toward two homeless men sitting against the stone wall of a neighboring building, squabbling over something tall in a dirty, brown paper bag. The wind was whipping the dust around and onto them just as the air currents were taking the smoke up and away from the cigarettes.

I said, "It might be a little easier if I could interview each of you alone."

Willups rolled his lower lip under his upper teeth. "What's this about?"

"The death of Mary Kohl."

Billy Danvers said, "Awesome tragedy, man."

The others gave him a collective harsh look, but he just shrugged.

I said, "Any suggestions?"

Carmody said, "Tell you what. Take Donnell first, because he's going to be worrying about it until he talks to you."

Willups said, "Now, Cassie, what are you saying that for?"

Carmody ignored him. "Take Billy second. In fact, buy him some lunch, he needs filling out. I've got a sales call to make by car, so we can ride there together and back if you need more time with me. Berny here can see you after that. Okay?"

I could see why Arthur Pickard was impressed by Carmody, and I wondered how much like her Mary Kohl had been. "Sounds fine to me. Everybody else?"

Just nods, no smiles except Billy Danvers, who had his eyes closed, "grooving" or whatever they call it nowadays.

Donnell Willups seemed nervous in his office, maybe because he never got his smoke outside. The office itself wasn't much, just a twelve by twelve with desk, chairs, and computer hutch. Computer printouts covered every horizontal

surface, and more were tacked to every vertical one.

He said, "Excuse the mess."
"Forget it."

"Mary, she was just starting to wade through all this, then ..."

Willups didn't finish the sentence. About forty-five, he had a face creased with lines and a pockmarked nose almost as wide as his mouth. His hair was military-short, but his sports jacket was wrinkled and the slacks didn't go well with it or the tie. The fingers on his right hand kept drumming the desk-top, the portrait of a harried executive.

I said, "She'd been working with you just a few days?"

"Yeah. I think she would have been good, though. She was only here a week, ten days, she asked me if I was free for a drink. I said sure, and we talked for maybe an hour, hour and a half about what she wanted to learn and do more. She'd already picked up a lot just sitting in the pool with Berny—that's the young girl downstairs, Bernadette—and playing on the word processor."

"Her experience from the old days wasn't rusty?"

"I don't know, could she type fast or what. I do know she could picture the job, the task at hand, you know what I'm saying?"

"I think so. So you asked Mr. Pickard to have her work with you."

"Yeah." He swept his hand around the room. "You can see why. Cassie's burying me in paperwork."

"Mary Kohl talk about anything that was bothering her?"

"Bothering her? Not to me."

"Maybe to Bernadette—I'm sorry, her last name?"

"Nucci."

"Nucci, thanks."

"That it?"

I wanted to ask him about Billy Danvers' comment on "Here comes Mary," but I couldn't see a way to do that without tipping that somebody, Bernadette Nucci, had told me about it.

I said, "Yes, thanks for your time."

As I moved toward the door, Willups said, "What unit?"

I stopped and turned to him. "We both have the look, don't we?"

"You get it, you never lose it."

"Not after what we went through getting it."

Willups took a breath. "So, what unit?"

"MP's as a branch. Saigon, mostly. You?"

"American Division, in and around Cu Chi."

"Mostly under it, the way I heard."

"Then you heard it better than I lived it. I was too big to be a tunnel rat, but Mr. Pickard's boy, that's what he did. A good one, too, till the night he ran out of luck."

"Happens to all of us someday."

Donnell Willup shook his head. "Hope it's not for a while yet, myself."

"You call this taking me out for lunch, dude?"

I handed Billy Danvers his hot dog. "Think of me as running a low-budget operation."

"Aw, man, but this is like weak, *mongo* weak."

I paid the vendor under the umbrella for the two hot dogs and matching colas and steered Danvers toward a bench without too much pigeon guano on it. A lot of people were following our example but sitting on blankets and towels, makeshift office picnics.

Danvers was as skinny as a rail, the shock of reddish hair thatch-cut on his head and white sidewalls two inches up from the ears all the way around. Wearing a T-shirt with Mick Jagger's lips prominently caricatured and black jeans that billowed on his legs, Danvers sat at one end of the bench and studiously laid his lunch

on one of the slats. As he popped his soda can with one hand and took off the headphones with the other, I thought I heard "Turn, Turn, Turn" coming over the earpieces.

I said, "The Byrds?"

Danvers interrupted a gulp of cola, almost choking. "Oh, too cool, dude. You recognize the sounds?"

"I remember them."

"Sweet music, sweet as burning icing. Your gen had all the breaks, man. Safe sex, weed to smoke, and the best music the galaxy has ever seen."

Or heard. "Billy—"

"I mean, what's my gen like contributed to the world, huh? I shall tell you. Mountain biking and bungee-jumping. I perceive a cultural gap there, right?"

"Billy, how well did you know Mary Kohl?"

A shrug. "Just through the chapel, you know?"

"Where you all smoke."

"Right. She was okay, smoked Berny's brand so they could like double up when necessary."

"Double up?"

"Light one and both of them smoke it. The wind in the chapel, man, it does *mongo* bad things to the lifespan of your chosen brand."

"So both Kohl and Nucci would smoke the same cigarette to make it last longer?"

"Not. To get St. Nick from it faster because the butt would last shorter in the wind, dig?"

Dig. "You talk with Mary Kohl much?"

"Just in the chapel. Aside from the habit, we didn't have, like, a lot of common ground, you know?"

"The first time you met her, I hear you said something about her."

Danvers turned to the hot dog for the first time, buying time, I thought. Around chewing, he said, "Don't follow that, dude."

"I heard the first time Kohl came down to the chapel, you said something about her."

"Oh." Elaborate facial expression. "Yeah, yeah, I remember it well. I said like, 'Hey, what do you know. H-e-e-e-r-e's Mary.' Get it?"

"Modeled on 'Here's Johnny'?"

"*Exacta-mundo*. Like for J. C. when *The Tonight Show* was totally boss."

"Why?"

Another bite. "Why?"

"Yes. Why'd you say that about Kohl?"

"Just like occurred to me, man."

I looked into Billy Danvers' face and didn't believe him but couldn't see how or why he'd be lying to me about it. "You ever meet her before that day?"

"Not during this incarnation, man." Danvers pantomimed looking at a wristwatch he wasn't wearing. "Oh, so sorry. Got to get back to the mine-shaft."

As he adjusted the headphones, I caught a few bars of The Association's "Cherish." Danvers ate the rest of the hot dog on the stroll, seeming to gargle more than drink the cola.

"So how was lunch with Billy?"

"A movie. I'm just not sure which one."

"Try *Wayne's World*. He couldn't help you, huh?"

I looked at Cassie Carmody. We were driving in a Ford Taurus around Leverett Circle toward the Galleria Mall in Cambridge. I would have thought that public transportation, specifically the Lechmere branch of the Green Line, would have been easier, but maybe she had heavy samples of fixtures in the trunk. Carmody herself was on the college side of thirty, athletic without being muscular. She wore her chestnut hair in a flaring, shingled cut, not much jewelry, and too much perfume, even with the windows down. Her yellow suit looked like raw silk over a powder blue blouse, and her eyes even at the wheel had a sideways tendency to

keep you in view when you didn't think she'd be watching.

We made the turn toward Lechmere. "So, I've never talked with a private investigator before."

"Not many of us in retail."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. A lot of the store security guys will come over and try to hit on me, but they never seemed . . . real, if you know what I mean."

"Some of them are the real thing, retired cops or military. Others are wannabes, spend a lot of money on gun catalogues and a lot of time doing Robert DeNiro in their bedroom mirrors."

"I thought he was supposed to be a taxi driver."

"That's the idea."

Carmody frowned, then nodded as though she'd gotten it. "So, which are you?"

"Me?"

"Real or wannabe?"

"Decide for yourself."

A saucy smile this time. "I'd say real."

"What was Mary Kohl?"

"Mary? I didn't know her that well, but she was a wannabe who used to be real."

"How do you mean?"

A shrug. "She had the job, then fell into the trap, hubby and kiddies, then wanted out and back to where she was before."

"Pretty comprehensive."

Carmody frowned again. "For her?"

"For you. Not knowing her that well and all."

"You knew her five minutes—no, five sentences—and you could tell she was Queen Bee."

"And room in the Pickard hive for only one?"

The saucy smile. "Maybe. I've earned it."

We started passing through the strong smell of skunk. I said, "Don't you want to put the windows up?"

"Why?"

"The skunk."

"What . . . oh, is there a bad smell?"

"You don't notice it?"

"Uh-uh. Had an accident when I was a kid. I can't give you all the medical mumbo-jumbo, but it took my sense of smell. Makes food kind of boring, since most of that is smell, not tastebuds, but the upside is I care less about eating and more about staying in shape. Or hadn't you noticed?"

I looked over at Carmody. "I noticed."

"You going to do anything about it?"

I thought of a hillside across town with stones sticking out of the ground. "Probably not."

Neither a smile nor a frown this time. "Your loss."

"Did you know Mary Kohl before she started at the Pickard Company?"

"Never saw her before."

Mechanical, no personality to the answer.

I said, "Do you know if anybody else did?"

"No."

"When Bernadette Nucci first brought Mary Kohl down to the chapel, Billy Danvers made a remark, right?"

Carmody looked over at me squarely. "What?"

"Danvers said something about her, using her name."

"Oh, right. I forget what."

"Can you try to remember?"

"The exact words, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Oh, wow, that was what, a month ago?"

"Try."

"Try. Okay. Billy said something like, 'Oh, boy. Here comes Mary, dudes.'"

"What'd he mean?"

Carmody turned her head squarely to me again. "I don't know. I didn't get it."

We entered the parking garage for the Galleria. Carmody slid the Taurus into a parking space and said I should wait.

I did. I also watched her walk to the store entrance off the garage. Fetching, but she never stopped at the trunk for any samples.

Once Carmody was gone three minutes, I reached over to the little lever near the driver's door and released the trunk lid. I got out and checked. Full of fancy wood dowels and metal clamps and security cables, all of which added up to retail fixtures and not much else I could see. I closed the trunk and got back in a full five minutes before Cassie Carmody returned, smiling and striding a little to show off her good shape.

"And she didn't tell you anything on the way back either?"

"Just small talk. Intentionally so."

Bernadette Nucci rubbed her chin as we let the rush hour traffic go by outside a coffee shop. "Like, what do you think? You're wasting your time?"

"Maybe. Maybe there was nothing to Billy Danvers' comment, either, but I'm pretty sure he was lying to me at lunch, and I can't see why."

"I wish I could remember exactly what he said that day."

"Cassie Carmody told me it was, 'Oh, boy. Here comes Mary, dudes.'"

"No. I mean, that's close, but . . ." A bleak smile. "Sorry."

"Billy said it was more 'H-e-e-e-r-e's Mary.'"

"What, like they used to do on Johnny Carson?"

"Right."

"No. No, then that's definitely wrong. It wasn't like that at all."

"Like what?"

"Like some announcer. It was more like . . . I don't know, like Billy was singing it?"

I just looked at her.

Back in my office I flipped through the notes I'd taken, trying to read the entries in a different order from the way I'd written them. Nothing seemed to make sense until I lined up three things I'd been told, one by Bernadette Nucci, another by Cassie Carmody, and a third by Arthur Pickard. Then I thought of something else, something I'd heard but never thought to write down.

It was thin, but I thought I could prove it one way or the other.

The next day at ten o'clock, I was in the alley behind the chapel, paying two guys in torn clothing who looked dirty and smelled worse ten bucks each to sit and be quiet with me, since I was dressed the same way. I pulled an old Boston Red Sox bill-cap down over my eyes.

The Society of St. Nick came out and gathered about ten feet above and twenty feet away from me. The smokers talked

about how Mr. Pickard had ranted and raved at them about the private investigator the day before. The wind was pretty steady, but it died once, and the pocket of calm brought that sweet smell of burning icing down to me. I took a deep breath, and shook my head for being right, because I didn't really want to be.

"Hey, man, you are not supposed to be in here."

"Pickard give the repel-all-boarders command?"

"What are you talking about?"

I sat down in front of Donnell Willups. "I know, Donnell."

His face gave it up, some blinking, then almost a smile. "I knew it. I knew it when Billy came to see me yesterday, after you bought him the hot dog."

"He told you what I asked about."

"Yeah. He didn't want me getting into trouble, so he said he turned it around some so you'd never get the drift of it. But you did, huh?"

"It took a me awhile. Bernadette, who's led a pretty sheltered life, told me you smoked these 'horrendous' Turkish cigars. Cassie told me she had no sense of smell. Billy loves sixties rock, and Bernadette said he nearly sang the words when she brought Mary Kohl along

with her. The refrain to The Association's 'Along Comes Mary.'

Willups nodded at his desk-top, then took out the case with his "cigars" in them. "Mary," short for marijuana. Billy saying, 'What do you know, along comes Mary.'

"With Pickard's attitude on drugs, he would have pitched you out."

"In a heartbeat, son's memory or no son's memory. I was floundering here, Cuddy, buried in all this paperwork, but it's the only job I know. Hell, it's the only real job I ever had."

"Then Mary Kohl comes to the chapel with Nucci, and Kohl realizes what you're smoking there."

"It was the pressure, man. I mean, if I'd been a guy who drinks, it would have been martinis for lunch, you know what I'm saying? But back in the Nam, I developed a taste for the weed, and it helped me cope. Back then and now."

"Mary Kohl forced you to get her the transfer."

"I thought that might be it, might be enough. Hell, Billy didn't care what I smoked, and so she was the only threat. But I could see what she was doing. Just two days in my office and Mary was taking over my job. Taking it out from under me,

man." Willups looked up. "Tunneling under me."

I thought of Cu Chi and nodded.

Willups opened the case, took out a rolled one, and stuck it in his mouth, then started patting pockets for matches. "She was fixing to eat me up. I followed her from work once, my car along the trolley tracks. I figured Mary was the type to go home the same, direct way every day, and I was right. I waited for her that night, and . . ."

He seemed to just stall out, like a tired engine on a hill.

I said, "You'd have had to kill both Billy and me, you know."

Slowly, "I know. Billy, he never thought anything about me maybe being the one, but eventually he would. And once you were on to me, I . . ."

Another stall, except for the hand that found some matches. Willups had a match going when he suddenly stopped, the flame just inches from the tip of the paper. With the other hand, he took the "cigar" out of his mouth and looked at it.

I said, "Pickard's policy?"

The Vice President of Operations stared at me.

I let out a breath. "Go ahead. It doesn't make any difference now."

Donnell Willups stuck the thing back in his mouth and lit up.

FICTION

JUST A THOUGHT

Taylor McCafferty



Illustration by Jim Adams

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Two hours after my sixteen-year-old sister, Emma Jane, openly sassed our widowed mother right in front of old Mrs. Krebs, everybody in Beech Grove had heard about it. And everybody who'd heard about it couldn't believe it.

Up to that Monday morning almost a year ago, Mama had been something of a legend to the other parents in this tiny Kentucky town. Folks were always saying that us Chism kids were the best behaved kids they ever did see. To hear them tell it, you'd have thought Mama should've helped Dr. Spock out with his book. When Mama heard folks talking about us, she always smiled proudly and said, "Well, I reckon I have a talent for making people do what I want them to do."

None of us kids would ever have disagreed with that particular statement. Emma Jane and I and our brother Kyle were all convinced that Mama did indeed have a talent. Like some people could paint pretty pictures and other people could sing pretty songs, our mother could think things pretty dead.

That's right. Our mama could kill just by thinking about it.

Even now, just thinking about it makes me feel a little scared. But then again, I can't ever remember a time when I wasn't scared. We all were. Because, for as far back as any of us kids could remember, Mama had been able to do what she could do.

Kyle was the oldest at nineteen, and he said Mama could do it even when he was a baby. He knew she could do it back then because there'd been a pony he'd fallen off when he was three. Mama had blamed the pony.

Over the years, come to think of it, there have been quite a few animals Mama has found fault with. I'm just fifteen myself, but I can remember a goat that butted her. Once. And a cat whose last decision was to scratch Mama's outstretched hand.

I'm sure there have been people, too—although you can never be absolutely sure about people. Mama certainly isn't going to admit it. Not in front of us kids anyway. I do remember, however, one smart-alecky saleslady who made the mistake of calling Mama "a stupid hick" right in front of me. Mama's mouth went all white right after. Then she turned to me and actually smiled. As if she hadn't even heard what the woman had said. "Come along, Cass," Mama said evenly.

I read of the saleslady's sudden death in the paper the next day. The news article had said something about a stroke causing her death, but I knew the truth.

All us kids knew the truth. Of course, none of us has ever told anybody outside the family about Mama's talent. For one thing, loose tongues might make Mama very angry. For another, who in the world would believe us?

My sister Emma Jane and I came close to telling only once. That was two years ago, right after Daddy died. Daddy Chism died, oddly enough, the very night Mama found out about the waitress he'd been seeing in town.

Of course, in a town the size of Beech Grove a lot of people had known about the waitress. Even Emma Jane and I had known about her, and we'd been real scared for Daddy. It wasn't exactly a subject you could discuss with him, though. So we'd kept quiet, thinking that surely Mama wouldn't do something awful to somebody in the family. Then, too, we'd also thought that maybe she'd never find out.

We'd been wrong. On both counts.

After Daddy's death, there were the usual rumors circulating around the Pigeon Fork Dry Goods Store. Emma Jane and I figured that this might be the ideal time to let the world know about Mama. And maybe to let Mama herself know she couldn't do that to our daddy and get away with it.

It turned out that we were wrong all over again.

All those rumors died almost as fast as Daddy Chism. Right after Doc Wheeler's autopsy just showed a brain hemorrhage. No drugs, no poison, no wounds. Doc Wheeler told Emma Jane at the funeral, "An artery in your daddy's head just decided to burst." Emma Jane and I had looked at each other and known then it was useless to try to convince anybody what we and Kyle and Kyle's new wife Carlene all knew—that it wasn't the artery that had done the deciding. It was Mama.

Nobody in the family was surprised, either, when not a month later that waitress had herself a brain hemorrhage, too. Folks said, "What a coincidence," but the family wasn't surprised. Just like none of us was surprised when Emma Jane sassed Mama in front of old Mrs. Krebbs that Monday.

But then, every one of us had been at that Sunday dinner the day before.

It had started out like all the other Sunday dinners. The table had been set as usual with Mama's finest—a pink floral china set ordered long ago from the Sears catalogue. Each glass, each plate, each piece of shining stainless told of long hours of careful cleaning.

Not by Mama, of course. It was my job, and Emma Jane's, to keep Mama's table looking beautiful.

Beside each gleaming plate was a carefully folded paper napkin—that is, beside each plate but one. Beside Mama's plate was a crisply creased, pale pink *cloth* napkin. Mama always insisted on cloth. She also insisted that Emma Jane and I wash and iron her cloth napkins every day. It was a duty that made us both very aware of every single time during dinner that Mama wiped her bright red mouth.

Lipstick, you know, is a very difficult stain to get out. It's a lot like blood in that respect.

That Sunday Mama's children had been as carefully placed as her dishes. Next to Mama was her favorite, the oldest, Kyle. Next to Kyle was me, Cass, the youngest, and finally, at the end of the table, as far away as possible, was Emma Jane. Diagonal to Kyle, next to Emma Jane, in No Man's Land, sat Kyle's wife Carlene.

Mama had trained us all very well. That afternoon as always we waited meekly for Mama's cue to begin. It was a moment Mama obviously relished. She smiled pointedly at Kyle and then reached for her napkin. We all reached for ours, like puppets pulled by a single string.

During dinner Emma Jane helped herself to fried chicken, green beans, and corn on the cob like the rest of us, but I could see how bad her hands were shaking. I knew why, of course. Everybody knew why.

The why was—no surprise—Mama herself. That morning Mama had gone on and on about Emma Jane's pets. First, it was her parakeet, Tweety. "That dumb pile of feathers is throwing seeds all over my dining room floor. Just look at that mess under its cage!" This was followed by ten minutes of yelling at Emma Jane to keep Tweety clean or else.

Then Mama started in on Emma Jane's cat Mitzi. Emma Jane had found the poor thing abandoned down by the schoolyard some six months before. Mama had liked it at first, but ever since it could no longer be called a kitten, Mama had been complaining.

"That stupid furball is constantly underfoot," she said over and over. This little statement was almost always followed by a kick in Mitzi's direction. Usually Mitzi got out of the way in time. That Sunday morning Mitzi had been a tad slow. By dinnertime Mitzi was still walking with a limp, and we all knew that this was the

beginning of the end. Or rather, the beginning of the ends. Mitzi's end and no doubt Tweety's.

I could hardly look at Emma Jane, I felt so sorry for her. I guess I've always felt a little sorry for Emma Jane. Those pets were one of the few real pleasures she had.

Unlike Mama, Emma Jane was tall and thin and quiet. Very quiet. Folks said Emma Jane's ambition was to be wallpaper—pretty and decorative but not something you noticed when you walked into the room.

Emma Jane had succeeded at the not-being-noticed part. The pretty and decorative part needed work.

It didn't help any that Mama still insisted on picking out our clothes and styling our hair. Here we were, obviously not little girls any more, and we were both still wearing our hair in plaits. Not to mention those dumb calico dresses that tied in the back.

Emma Jane knew what she looked like, too. Sometimes you could catch her staring at those white socks and those black patent leather flats that Mama insisted we wear—and you almost expected those shoes to melt right off her feet. When she looked like that, you could see our mother in her.

Then, too, Emma Jane had Mama's high cheekbones and her ice-blue eyes. Emma Jane, though, hadn't learned to use her eyes the way Mama had. Mama could pin a person to the wall with just a glance. Emma Jane mainly kept her eyes directed at her lap. Particularly if Mama was anywhere near.

Emma Jane also did something else when Mama was near. I guess she couldn't help it. Whenever she was nervous, Emma Jane yawned. She yawned a lot. I thought maybe it was her body's way of reminding her that where she'd rather be right that moment was in bed, with the covers pulled over her head.

Mama, however, made it real clear to all of us that she didn't care why Emma Jane did it. Mama just plain thought it was rude, period, and she wanted Emma Jane to cut it out. Immediately. Apparently Mama considered it downright insulting to have a daughter of hers yawning all the time. Particularly when Mama was talking.

So all through dinner that Sunday I watched Emma Jane sitting at the end of the table farthest from Mama, eating very little and swallowing yawns. Emma Jane must've been concentrating so hard on not yawning, she didn't notice the dartlike glances

Mama kept shooting her way. I saw them, though, and I didn't eat much either.

I was that worried about Emma Jane.

I reckon, growing up the way we did, Emma Jane and I were a lot closer than most sisters. When you're under siege, you need allies. All our lives Emma Jane and I had always had an unspoken pact: you look out for me, and I'll look out for you. More than once Emma Jane had barefaced lied to Mama to keep me out of trouble. And for my part, more than once I'd even taken the blame for something Emma Jane had done—just so's Emma Jane didn't get any more out of favor with Mama than she already was.

So naturally that Sunday I tried to get Emma Jane's attention, to warn her about the looks Mama kept directing at her, but Emma Jane wouldn't look my way. She just kept sitting there, staring at her lap and swallowing yawns.

Everybody at the table except me jumped when Mama spoke: "Something's been getting at the chickens here lately." Mama's tone was conversational, but we all knew by then that Mama never talked just to make conversation. Mama looked around the table. "Does anybody know what could be killing the chickens?"

Of course we all knew very well that if the chickens were dying, what—or rather who—was doing it. It had just been a matter of time before Mama thought up a good reason to get rid of Emma Jane's cat.

"Well?" Mama said.

Emma Jane's head suddenly jerked up. Evidently it had just occurred to her the direction Mama's conversation was headed. "Maybe it's a fox, Mama." Emma Jane's voice was almost a whisper, but Mama must've heard every word.

"A fox? A fox, you say?" Mama laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "I think it's a fox all right. A fox that purrs."

Emma Jane looked as if she'd been slapped. "No, Mama, not Mitzi. Mitzi wouldn't do a thing like that."

Mama glared at her. "Are you calling me a liar? Is that what you're doing?"

Emma Jane looked away. "No, Mama," she mumbled.

After that Emma Jane continued sitting there, motionless, staring at her lap just like before, but you could see her mind turning.

What happened after that I bet Emma Jane has told me a hundred times. She does love to go on about what happened after that.

While I was sitting there feeling sorry for her, Emma Jane was starting to feel as if she might explode with frustration. She'd reached the same conclusion, of course, that I had. That Mitzi's days were numbered. That in fact Mama might've already counted off the last one.

Emma Jane told me she sat there fighting an urge to jump up and go look for her cat, but she knew if she left—right in the middle of dinner—Mama would probably do it right then. Just out of spite. There'd be no time to talk her out of it.

So Emma Jane just sat there, not looking at anybody, helplessness and total frustration pounding away in her head. Outside the window across from where she sat, she could see Mama's chickens cluck clucking in the side yard. It seemed to Emma Jane then that they weren't clucking but chuckling. Chuckling in smug chicken language. Chuckling at her predicament.

Mama's biggest chicken, a fat old rooster, came into view, and Emma Jane, in a sudden blinding flash of pure rage, wished it dead. Dead, she thought. *Dead!* Just like my poor Mitzi's going to be. Dead, dead, DEAD!

That's when that rooster gave a surprised squawk and fell. I myself remember this part. I had glanced over at Emma Jane right then, and I saw her eyes suddenly widen. I looked in the direction she was looking, and good heavens, there was Mama's chicken on the ground. What's more, it didn't seem to be moving.

I sat there wondering what was happening.

Emma Jane looked back over at Mama then, but Mama hadn't noticed a thing. She was too busy talking to poor Carlene. "Do you mean to tell me," Mama was saying, "that you do *not* iron my boy's sheets and pillowcases? Why, I never heard of such a thing."

I turned back to Emma Jane. She was looking out the window again.

The rooster still hadn't moved.

When I looked at Mama again, she was staring straight at Emma Jane. When Emma Jane saw Mama staring at her, she actually gave a little start. Mama looked annoyed. "Emma Jane," Mama said, "have you ever heard of such a thing?"

Emma Jane's voice shook a little, but she managed to say, "No, Mama."

I was starting to figure out what was going on by then. My heart began to pound.

"It's pure laziness, that's all. Pure laziness." Mama said, turning back to Carlene. Carlene's eyes had narrowed to slits, but she didn't say anything. She just exchanged a long-suffering look with Kyle.

I, on the other hand, was now concentrating on Emma Jane. She was looking out the window again. The rooster still lay where it had fallen. Emma Jane stared at it for a real long time.

Then Mama's prize hen wandered into view.

Lordy. In the next five minutes Emma Jane must've thought an awful lot about Mama's chickens dying. In fact, for a while there she mustn't have thought about anything else.

The side yard began to look like a chicken battlefield.

Emma Jane evidently was concentrating so hard she didn't immediately realize how very quiet it had gotten in the dining room. Everybody else had noticed by then, of course, how much Emma Jane seemed to be staring out the window. When Emma Jane turned back to the table, she found four pairs of eyes looking at her.

Mama's pair were shooting sparks. "Girl, what is so all-fired interesting outside? I'll have you know it's downright rude to be staring out the window when your mother is talking."

From where she sat, Mama didn't have as good a view of the side yard as Emma Jane and I did. So all the time Mama was saying this, she was getting up and sauntering over to the window. When she got there, her voice just stopped, like a faucet abruptly shut off.

Mama stood motionless at the window for a full minute.

When she finally turned and faced Emma Jane, Mama looked different. It took me a second to figure out what was suddenly in her face that hadn't been there before. What was suddenly in her face, in fact, that I'd *never* seen there before.

Wariness.

That was it. Mama actually looked uneasy. "What do you suppose has happened to my chickens?" Her voice was so calm that Kyle and Carlene and I all squirmed a little in our chairs.

Emma Jane didn't squirm, though. She looked straight back at Mama and actually smiled. "Well, Mama," she said, "maybe it's a fox."

Mama's eyes looked like an explosion had gone off behind them. "You're going to be sorry, girl," Mama said. She glanced over at the parakeet cage. Just a glance. That was all it took. Poor Tweety

didn't even make a sound. He just fell with a soft thud to the floor of the cage.

Emma Jane's eyes were something to be seen then. They seemed to flicker, lit from within by something bright and dangerous. She glanced over at the window, and we could all hear chicken squawks out there. It would've been kind of funny, except Mama didn't look the least bit amused.

Her eyes looked as strange suddenly as Emma Jane's.

I guess it was the chickens squawking that brought Mitzi running. That cat ran into the dining room as if it had just heard its dinner calling. Emma Jane and Mama saw Mitzi at the same time.

Mama looked tickled pink.

Emma Jane looked real pale.

"Well now," Mama said. "Look what we have here." She smiled slowly and glanced over at Emma Jane. "You know, I do believe Mitzi here is feeling a mite poorly."

Emma Jane almost jumped out of her chair. "Mama! Don't do it. *Don't!* Isn't there something *you* care about? Isn't there?" Emma Jane was standing now, and her eyes traveled down the table, past Carlene, past me, finally settling on Kyle.

"Let me see," Emma Jane went on, her eyes glued to Kyle's face. "Can I guess what you love, Mama?"

Kyle's eyes were showing the whites all around. His face drained of color as he stared wildly back at Emma Jane.

Carlene ran over and put her arms around him. "No!" she screamed. "Emma Jane, you can't!"

"Carlene's right," Mama said, "you can't. You're bluffing."

"Am I?" Emma Jane didn't even look like herself any more. I could hardly recognize my shy, quiet sister. When Emma Jane spoke, her mouth was all twisted, like she was tasting something bitter. "Can you afford to find out, Mama?"

Mama's mouth now looked twisted, too. "Why, I could—" she started to say.

"Think about me?" Emma Jane finished for her. "Sure you can. And I can think about you." Mama took a step backward, and Emma Jane smiled. "Do you want to see whose thoughts can get there faster?" she said.

There was a long silence while Mama just stared at Emma Jane. As if she were measuring her or something.

When Mama finally spoke, her voice was actually kind of shaking. "Why, this is silly." She looked around at the rest of us and

smiled kind of lopsidedlike. Then, wiping her hands on her pale pink napkin, she added, "Look, we're all family here. And all this—this is nonsense." Mama looked over at Emma Jane almost pleadingly. "Come on, let's finish this here dinner. Carlene, you come sit down. The food's getting cold."

I almost whooped with joy. I looked over at Emma Jane, and I gave her a wink. Boy oh boy, I thought, things are sure going to be different now! I picked up a drumstick from my plate, and I tell you, that first bite of fried chicken tasted better than anything I'd ever eaten.

I hadn't even swallowed that bite, though, when Emma Jane said, looking at me as if I were one of her pets, "Uh, Cass, go get me a cloth napkin. I don't like these paper ones any more."

There was a hushed silence.

First everybody stared at Emma Jane, and then they stared at me.

And me, well, I didn't stare at anybody. I looked at my lap, and for a long moment it seemed as if I could hardly breathe.

Then, of course, I scooted back my chair, got up, and headed into the kitchen. Where I got Emma Jane her napkin.

She didn't even say thank you when I handed it to her.

Like I said at the beginning, that was over a year ago. It took us all a little while to adjust to the new way things were. Like the other day, when Mama was talking over the back fence to Mrs. Krebbs, she forgot for a minute and yelled at Emma Jane just like she used to. "Emma Jane, run get me some tea! With lots of sugar, mind you."

Emma Jane had been sitting on the porch swing reading a novel not five feet from where Mama was standing, but Emma Jane didn't even look in Mama's direction. "I'm sure you don't mean me," she said, her eyes on the pages of her book. "I must've heard wrong."

With Mrs. Krebbs looking on, Mama's face turned beet-red. "Oh yes, that's right," Mama said through gritted teeth. "I meant for Cass to do it. Cass, you run along now."

I was right in the middle of weeding Mama's flower garden, but I jumped right up and ran inside to do like Mama asked.

Come to think of it, I reckon I've been running for a whole year now. I've really had to hurry to get everything done that used to take both me *and* Emma Jane to do before. The cleaning, the

dishes, the shopping. And, of course, I've got to take care of Emma Jane's stupid pets.

She's got herself two new parakeets now and *four* cats.

Then too, there's hers and Mama's napkins. To wash and iron. Every single day.

It's been a right busy year, but it's almost over. I'll be sixteen in a couple of days—as old as Emma Jane was that Sunday—and I've got hope.

Here lately I find myself thinking a lot about death and dying. I can't seem to help myself. Of course I think about it most when I'm washing pale pink napkins.

The deaths I'm thinking on, though, sure ain't chickens.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

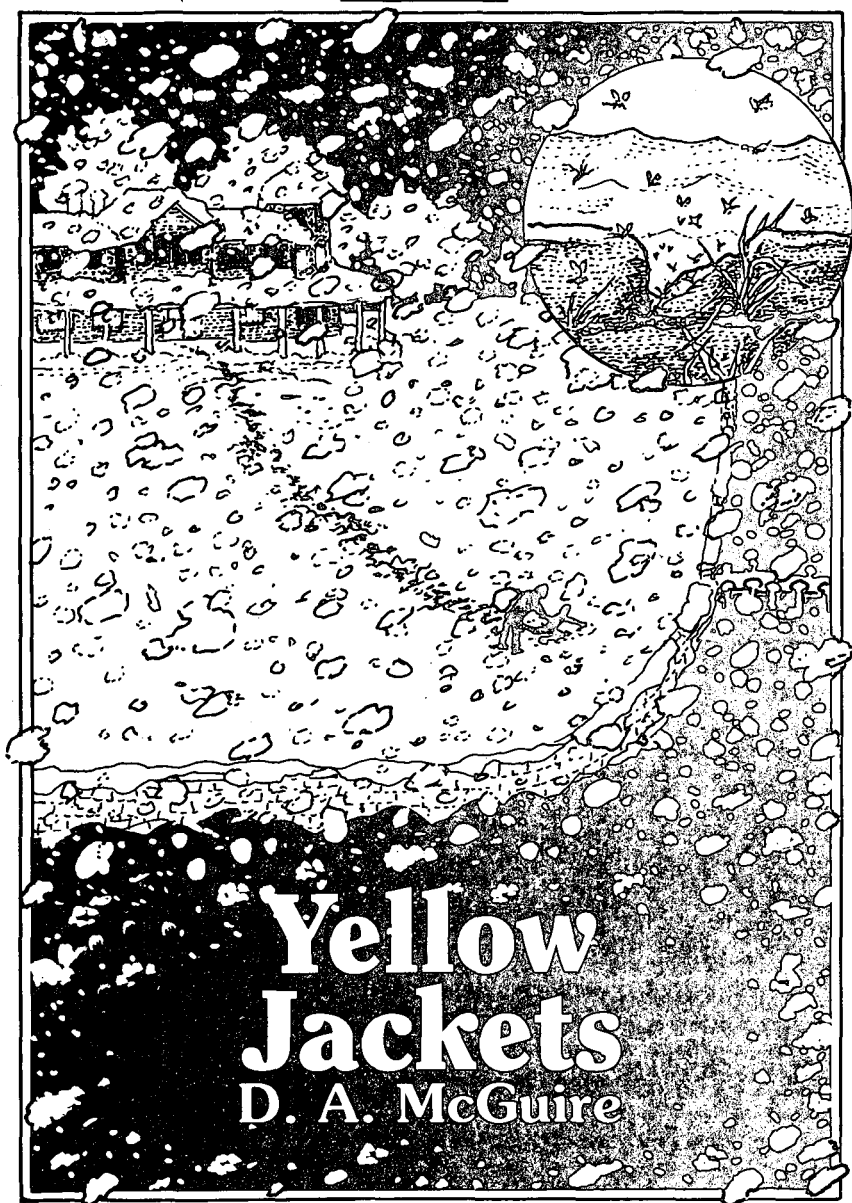


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Un . . . deux . . . trois . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION



Yellow Jackets

D. A. McGuire

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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When Mr. Hornton called and said he had a job for me, I expected it would be the usual thing, cleaning his dirty paintbrushes, mixing up paint, or maybe filling up his old pickup truck with junk to be lugged out to the landfill. That's the kind of work he usually has for me, though sometimes he lets me do a little painting, some background work or maybe some silkscreens for those political signs you find all over people's lawns in the early spring. You know the kind I mean. They get all ratty and torn up with the first stiff breeze that blows through, and on some yards you might see half a dozen or more all of opposing parties and different races and you start to wonder if the property owner is right in the head, or out to have a good laugh at the expense of his neighbors who have to pick up the things once they get torn and blow all over their yards.

Besides, Mr. Hornton says every politician—and everyone who wants to be a politician—is a crook. But he also says even a crook's money is as green as anyone else's. Mr. Hornton, as I once heard my friend Jake Valari say, is a wise old bird.

But I digress, as my social studies teacher, Mr. Locks, puts it. (Sometimes Mr. Locks

gets to talking about the Celtics or Bruins when he should be teaching my class about the political turmoil in the Middle East.) What I wanted to say was this: I never expected Mr. Hornton to say, "Hop up in the truck, Herbie. We've got a real special job to do today," and then, after I did (noticing the back of his pickup was empty), find myself roaring off down Bayview Road at about ninety miles an hour. Mr. Hornton is a retired sign painter who does odd jobs on the side. He is probably about eighty or seventy, or maybe even in his sixties, but he can still, as Jake puts it, be "hell on wheels."

And Jake ought to know because he's a cop in the town where I live, Manamesset, which sits right on Manamesset Bay, on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Sometimes I think Jake's probably pulled Mr. Hornton over once or twice, but "unofficially," if you know how I mean, because Jake doesn't usually do that sort of thing, being a detective, that is, in fact the only detective on Manamesset's small police force.

Anyhow, I digress again. That cold February afternoon it was just me and Mr. Hornton buzzing along in his dilapidated old Chevy. He'd been waiting for me, he said, to get

out of school because, as he put it this time, "We have a real *important* job to do."

I didn't say much. I didn't even ask where we were going. I'd been taught not to interrupt grownups when they were busy—or thinking. And I could tell Mr. Hornton was real busy thinking.

"Bet you wonder what we're up to, don't you, Herbie?"

I did know we were getting farther and farther from town, and fast approaching the low-lying, marshy part of Manamesset. Houses were becoming scarcer; year-round homes were steadily giving way to "cottages" and what we in town called shacks. I knew if we continued along this way we'd come to an entirely different section, with stretches of privately-owned land and huge tracts made up of part marsh, part woodlands, with long, winding, unpaved roads leading to massive "summer houses" set along some of the most gorgeous beachfront property in the state. Sometimes I rode my bike way out here. Sometimes I even went up a few of those private roads. Most of them had chains across their entrances; a few even had metal gates.

"Well, what do you say, Herbie?" Mr. Hornton asked. Ap-

parently he was a little annoyed I wasn't more interested.

"I suppose I am wondering, Mr. Hornton. I guess you're being real mysterious today."

"Mysterious?" Then he laughed, or rather he sort of brayed, like a donkey would.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't being disrespectful. I like Mr. Hornton. He always has a few extra dollars for me if I don't mind "getting my hands a little dirty." And the money comes in handy, since my mother works as a chambermaid and doesn't make very much this time of year. She needs all she can get for "essentials," and seldom has any extra for me. She likes Mr. Hornton, too; we even have dinner together once in a while, with Mr. Hornton supplying the clams for chowder, or the scallops for what my mother calls "scaloped scallops," which is just about the best dish she knows how to make. She sometimes says that Mr. Hornton is all alone in the world, and so are we, so it just makes sense to help each other out when we can.

But I keep digressing. We went speeding down Bayview Road until we came to Old Bayview Road, and then South Bayview Road. (The roads in Manamesset can be named pretty strangely sometimes.) And then the road narrowed

down almost to one lane, and we came to a sign that read "Stop. Private Property. Private Road. Police Take Notice." Of course we ignored all that as most year-round people do. We kids always do. We all knew which private sections went totally ignored and unoccupied in winter and which ones had caretakers and groundskeepers. Still, I must admit I was getting a little curious, not knowing where we were going, and it occurred to me that maybe we were just going fishing off somebody's private dock, or maybe Mr. Hornton was doing a little caretaking himself. Maybe we were going to walk around a couple of big old houses and check the locks on the doors, or maybe even go inside and check the windows and make sure the pipes had been drained and that no one was camping in any of them while their rich owners were off in Boston or Connecticut or wherever most of these people came from.

I thought I had guessed right, too, when we suddenly stopped at the entrance to a second private road. There was a rusty gate across it, along with a sign that said "Private. Keep out. Premises Electronically Monitored." Mr. Hornton climbed out, unlocked the gate using a key from a long chain

on his belt, and climbed back into the truck.

"Bet you don't know what we're up to, do you, Herbie?"

"I know this for sure, Mr. Hornton, you've got a key, so whatever it is we're up to, it's legitimate."

"Sure as hell is," he laughed gruffly, stuffing the key and chain into his pocket.

That's when I noticed something I should have noticed before, back at Mr. Hornton's house. He wasn't wearing his old weatherbeaten painter's pants, what he calls his work clothes. No, he was wearing neatly pressed, khaki-colored dress pants and a plain white shirt. He had a shiny black belt on his pants, and his shoes were ordinary black leather loafers. There wasn't a paint spot on them. Even his brown corduroy jacket, the one he wore everywhere, looked extraordinarily clean. A dry cleaner's tag showed from the cuff of the left sleeve. If Mr. Hornton was planning to walk around some rich person's big old summer house to make sure the windows were locked and no one had been sleeping on the porch, he was dressed mighty strange for it. He almost looked like he was going visiting.

I was wearing my school clothes, an old sweatshirt with "Yale" printed across it, a pair

of worn bluejeans, my worst sneakers, my heavy winter jacket. Still, I suppose for a thirteen-year-old kid, I looked presentable enough.

The road we were driving down was all dirt now, and it seemed to lead directly to the bay—I could see sea gulls circling ahead, and the sounds of a rough surf were getting louder as we drove along. It was wooded in through here, pitch pines and oaks and lots of scraggly little bushes that looked like blueberry, maybe some sumac. Then suddenly it just opened up, and I knew we were actually above the bay, not on a cliff exactly but on a low bluff. For a moment all I could see ahead of us was blue: blue sky, blue ocean, and then, rising up out of the middle of it, an absolutely massive house with octagonal towers at either end and a fancy, clay-tiled roof on top, all orange.

The roof, that is, was orange, and I knew I'd seen that house before, from the waters of the bay beyond and below. I'd seen it sitting up on the bluff with long, sloping lawns that reached down to a rocky, battered seawall and the smoky gray contours of a beach below that. Jutting out into the water from the beach were a pair of jetties not three hundred feet apart; between them was a boat

mooring at the end of a forty foot dock.

Past the house, out in the bay about a thousand feet from shore, was a little island of scrubby bushes, rocky shorelines, and straight-edged bluffs that each winter were scraped down smaller and smaller in size. Still, the island retained enough height to deserve its name: Salvage Hill. The most recent nautical charts called it Salvage Island, but to the local residents, it would always be known as Salvage Hill.

I'd seen this house from the island. I'd been clamming out there late last summer with Jake and a couple of his friends. He'd told me the island was privately owned, but that the owners, who lived in the house with the clay-tiled roof across the way, couldn't stop anyone from digging for clams below the low-tide mark. Besides, he said, they didn't care anyhow. We even had a picnic up on the beach, and no one said a thing.

"Salvage Hill," Mr. Hornton said as we drove up closer. I understood him; he meant all of it, the bluff, the island, the house. "What do you think?"

"Pretty impressive," Mr. Hornton.

We drove into a circular driveway made of smooth, round stones, cobblestones they must have been, and he turned

into a parking area next to a long, low garage that looked like it once had been a stable for horses. The house must have been even older than it looked.

"Friend of mine lived here, Esther Hadrinham," he said as he parked the truck. There was only one other car there, a black Toyota Cressida.

"She must be rich," I commented, trying not to be *too* impressed.

"She *was* rich." He'd enjoyed keeping me in suspense, but now his face turned sober. "She passed away two and a half years ago."

"Sorry to hear it." I was looking at the house, at its brick-arched rear entrance and its great wraparound porch, one of those Cape Cod porches that have no beginning and no end; they just circle the house, embracing it, so that almost anywhere you stand or sit you have a view of the bay. And then, as Mr. Locks would put it, the name Hadrinham "rang a bell" in my head.

"Hadrinham? We have a computer lab at school with a plaque on the wall with that name. He gave the school some money or something. And I think there's a hospice over in Northport with the same name."

"And the new wing of the library will have the same name," he said with a firm nod. "Named for *Esther* Hadrinham. She was a wonderful woman, Herbie, and now that her estate's cleared up, the town will benefit. The money will fix up a couple of elementary schools, finish the library, and add a recreational area to the Hadrinham Memorial Hospice over in Northport Park. She was a good and great woman."

"Are we here on a job for one of her relatives?" I asked.

"We're here on a very important job that requires a strong back, strong legs, and a quick and capable mind. Now, let's get hopping."

I remember thinking as we walked toward that huge old house that I'd hate to be the one who had to wash all those windows. The closer we got, the bigger the house looked; it must have had fifty or sixty windows, easy. Many of them were double windows, some were bay windows, the kind that stick out of the side of a house and probably have a cushioned seat on the inside so you can sit and look out. Plus there were the two towers, one set at either end toward the front of the house. They were three stories high, capped with the same clay-tiled roof as the

main house. I'd heard kids call this place "the castle." It was, quite simply, colossal and imposing.

And I bet everywhere you looked out from the house you could see the water—it sat right out on the bluff. I wished my mother could have seen it because she really loves that TV show *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. No doubt this house could have belonged to one of them, the rich and famous, that is.

We went through the brick arch up onto a slate-floored porch. The wind was pretty stiff off the water, this being February, and it would be good to get inside. I was surprised to see Mr. Hornton ring the doorbell. I had figured he might have a key, but he didn't. Above the doorbell was a small brass plaque that read "Salvage Hill."

After a few moments a smiling grayhaired black lady opened the door and let us in. She asked us to wait in the foyer while she went to fetch "Mrs. Rollins."

"I don't think I've ever been in a foyer," I told Mr. Hornton as I rotated on my heels to take it all in.

The foyer was circular, with doorways set at intervals around its circumference. On the other side was a long, curv-

ing staircase like one of those you see in movies. It wound up and out of sight, like a giant corkscrew.

In the foyer itself, between the doorways, were large gold-framed pictures of what must have been the Hadrinham family. One of them had caught my attention, the same one Mr. Hornton was staring at, a portrait of a beautiful, dark-haired, brown-skinned girl with huge, kind eyes and a faint smile, the kind of smile the covergirls on calendars give you, the kind my mother calls a "flirtatious grin." But that seemed odd because this woman, beautiful as she was, was dressed in an out-of-style, silky-looking dress with beads on the collar. Her hair was wavy, too, what I think was called bobbed, but I only know that because we did a special unit in my sixth grade class last year on the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression. So this picture had to have been painted at least sixty, no, seventy years ago. Had she been flirting with the artist? Did girls flirt back then?

I looked back at Mr. Hornton standing and smiling at the picture. I moved closer to it, read the plate beneath it: "Miss Esther Elizabeth Hadrinham, 1928."

"She was beautiful," I said.

"Yes, she was," he answered.

"And she was black," I looked from him to the painting, then back.

"She was that, too." He looked at me and frowned.

"She die of old age, Mr. Hornton?"

He turned aside and I could barely hear his answer, but I think it was no, and then he turned back and said, "She *was* black. And Polynesian. Her father was Ezra Ezekiel Hadrinham, the son of a freed slave who went from cabin boy to master of his own ship in less than ten years. He sailed the southern seas for a consortium of black investors who could find no white crew, let alone white officers, willing to work for them. So Ezra Hadrinham came here to find his crew, from among the black farmers and fishermen who lived in what was then called Little Manamesset." He paused, but I knew there was more.

"Captain Ezra Hadrinham met Lady Elizabeth Sulope on an island just northeast of New Zealand. Her father was the local chieftain, and when he gave Ezra his daughter's hand he also gave him her dowry, a sea chest filled with three hundred rare black pearls, each the size of a Concord grape. Ezra took half those pearls, paid off his investors, and started up his

own business. He bought ships no one wanted, hired men who couldn't find work elsewhere. Then he spent the next forty years shipping copra, coral, pearls; he even backed an occasional whaling ship."

He paused again, eyes intent on the portrait. I felt it was my cue to say something.

"You seem to know a lot about the family, don—"

He started up again just as though I weren't there.

"They say Ezra buried the other one hundred fifty pearls out there on Salvage Island, under a copse of white pine trees that were surely torn up by the hurricane of '38, if not by an earlier storm or nor'easter. Not a single white pine on the whole island now. But that's not the only story associated with Salvage Hill. Legend has it that there are at least two pirate ships out there, south of the island, that ran aground on some submerged sandbars back in 1710 or 1711."

Now he turned his eyes on me, frowned. "But that was before the Hadrinhams when this whole area was called Little Chip and Little Icy Bay." He kept frowning at me. "They say the ships got caught up together. The bars weren't there, not the year before, but hurricanes and nor'easters play with spits and bars, as well you

know. Here one season, gone the next. Still, the story goes that two ships ran aground while half the population of Little Chip sat out on Salvage Island and watched. The storm kept the people from getting very close, and when they did the ships were half buried under tons of sand and rocks. The story says one ship was eventually stripped clean, but the other carried forty chests of silver bars that were never accounted for, loot taken off a pair of Spanish galleons the pirates had raided and sunk off St. Pierre, in Martinique."

"Mr. Hornton—"

"Which the Spanish never had any right to, either, having taken it from the French. Just one thief stealing from another until the sea steals it all."

"I've heard some of those stories, Mr. Hornton, but I've also heard that some treasure-hunters went all over those bars with special sonar equipment and they never found anything, no signs of cannons or anchors or anything that would mark them as the site of a shipwreck."

This time he frowned at me so hard I tried to take it back.

"But what do experts know?" I shrugged. "Maybe they looked in the wrong place. Like you said, the bars do move around and . . ." I didn't like his scowl;

it seemed he had discovered something in me of which he greatly disapproved. So I blurted out, "Did she, did your friend Miss Hadrinham believe in the treasure stories?"

"How do I know what she believed in?"

"Sorry. I just thought, seeing you and her were . . . friends? Were you? Were you and Miss Hadrinham good friends?"

"She taught English for one year," he told me, looking back at her portrait with a distant glaze in his eyes. "When I was a senior in high school. Class of '39 we were. Miss Hadrinham read poetry to us, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. She had poetry readings right here, in this house, for the drama club. She was class play advisor. We did *Our Town* that year. I played George Gibbs."

And you were in love with her, Mr. Hornton, and you don't have to tell me that. You also don't have to tell me what's coming next because I can feel it before you even open your mouth . . .

"She taught only the one year, then the school board dismissed her." He turned his eyes my way, as though I had been the one who "Got rid of her, they did. They didn't want her teaching white boys and girls. But she was the best teacher I ever had."

And still, you *were* in love with her, and it was so strange seeing such a personal part of this old man revealed to me. If anyone had told me this was going to happen, I would have never believed them. The Mr. Hornton I knew was dour, simple, fiercely opinionated, but this was something totally unexpected: Mr. Elmer Hornton had a soul, too, what my English teacher, Mr. Cassidy, would have called a "romantic soul."

"You kept in touch, all those years," I said softly..

He hadn't heard me. "So don't you go asking me about any pirate treasure, boy. Those experts, they were right—there ain't a lick of truth to any of those stories. You come with me, and I'll show you the real treasure of Salvage Hill."

"Elmer? Elmer Everett Hornton, you old dear!" came a husky, yet unmistakably feminine voice from behind us. "Oh, Elmer, it's been too long!"

She virtually swept in, this large, grand woman dressed in a long, flowery skirt, ruffled blouse, and boots laced to the knee. With pearls and long gray hair, she needed only a turban to look like a gypsy, or a fortune-teller. Things were getting more interesting all the time.

She gave Mr. Hornton a big hug, and then me too, when she was introduced as "Mrs. Maudie Rollins, one of Esther's oldest and closest friends."

And as I stood there in that foyer being fussed over, and still not knowing what I was doing there in the first place, I realized I had a question I wanted answered. What I really wanted to know suddenly was just *how* Miss Esther Elizabeth Hadrinham had died.

"Elmer's told me all about you." Mrs. Rollins continued to gush over me as we walked down a long marbled hall filled with paintings, expensive-looking furniture, and even statues or busts that sat on ornate little shelves sticking out of the walls. Along the outer wall was a series of stained glass windows depicting blue-winged angels, swans with exaggerated curving necks, and feathery-leaved willow trees.

So people really did live like this. It really was like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Mom would have gone wild over this place.

"He's told me what a fine young man you are, which is such a rare thing these days, isn't it, Elmer?" Then she touched his hand and their

heads nipped together and they laughed as if over some private joke. I had the strange feeling that she too had been beautiful thirty or forty years ago.

"Now, *here* is the real treasure of Salvage Hill," Mr. Hornton said as he and Mrs. Rollins opened wide the pair of double doors at the end of the hall. I calculated we were near the front of the house, perhaps entering one of its two octagonal towers. "There, Herbie," he went on. "What do you think now?"

I was right; this was the west-facing tower, three stories high, with windows running in square and eight-sided panels from floor to ceiling all along its seaward side. But the most remarkable thing about this room wasn't its size or shape or location, but that it was a library. There were books everywhere.

On shelves lined up in neat rows before windows. In eight foot library-style stacks to the right and left of the double doors. On low wooden bookcases that crisscrossed the middle of the room in a zigzag pattern I'd seen in the children's section of our town library. And even overhead, in a series of shelves ringing the outer wall of the second floor; these were reached by a series of walk-

ways and ramps protected by wrought-iron railings.

"So?" Mr. Hornton sounded impatient. "Do you see it now?"

I looked around, up and down, then thrust my hands into my pockets and tried not to look stupid. But all I could see were books. No paintings. No fancy statues. No expensive furniture or antiques. The lights, suspended from the walkways overhead, were plain, green-shaded. There was hardly any furniture in the room, just a few beat-up looking wing chairs, a table with a computer and a printer on it, and across the room, against the windows between the shelves of books, another table with a sorry-looking slingback chair beside it.

So all I could think to say was, "Sorry, Mr. Hornton. All I see is just a bunch of books."

"Just a bunch of books?" Mrs. Rollins laughed, clapping her hands together. "Oh, he's utterly charming, Elmer."

"Just a bunch of books?" But Mr. Hornton wasn't amused. "Get over here, Herbert Sawyer, Jr., we've work to do."

Work to do . . .

Cataloguing books. Sorting books. Stamping books. Literature and poetry and science. History and reference and autobiography. First editions. Last editions. Collector's cop-

ies. Out-of-print books. Art books. Children's books. Atlases and encyclopedias and heavy, oversized, coffee table books.

And we were cataloguing every last one of them, too, but not with Mr. Hornton's name, or Salvage Hill, or Hadrinham, but with "Property of Manamesset Public Library." It turned out that Elmer Hornton, the man I knew as simply an ornery, know-it-all, retired sign painter, was a library trustee. And though Esther Hadrinham had left her entire library to the town, it was with the stipulation that Elmer Hornton be allowed to "oversee the disposition of its contents," along with the understanding that he be given the liberty of using the contents for his own personal use, until such time as he saw fit to send the aforesaid contents to the town library.

She had given him a library card, in effect, with no due date.

"Edwin Arlington Robinson, oh, one of my favorites," Mrs. Rollins exclaimed as I handed her down some books from a high shelf overlooking the bay toward the west. Below was a stretch of beach known as Sandy Shores. The two jetties actually divided the shoreline of Salvage Hill into Sandy Shores, to the west, and Rocky Shores, to the east. Between

the two jetties, where there had once been a road leading out to Salvage Island, there was just the dock and open water.

"These may need to be rebound," she told me, examining each leatherbound volume carefully. "But as they're not important editions, I think that will be all right." She was consulting a librarian's reference book as she spoke; then she looked up and saw me staring out the windows. Perhaps the question was on my face.

"The hurricane of '38 did that," she told me. "It tore right through the causeway going out to the island. But since it was a force of nature that did it, Esther wanted it left that way."

I looked over at Mr. Hornton, busily at work on a Macintosh computer. The man continued to amaze me. We'd been working a couple of hours now and I wanted more than anything to ask him how Esther Hadrinham had passed away, but I still hadn't found a way of doing so.

"Though the children, that is, Esther's niece and nephew, have always talked about rebuilding the road, or at least Isabelle, Esther's niece has. Isabelle was actually her step-niece. She's also talked about building a house on the island."

I stayed up on the ladder, saying nothing, but showed my interest by nodding.

"Esther's estate was left in pieces. A very large piece goes to the town, with a specific sum set aside for the schools and the library. There's another sum for the hospice in Northport Park. Her books, of course, are going to the library, at Elmer's discretion." She smiled over at him, but he was too busy to notice. "As he was Esther's lifelong friend."

"And the house and the island?" I asked gingerly. She seemed to be in a conversational sort of mood. Open and friendly, she was easy to talk to, what Mr. Cassidy would have called uninhibitedly voluble. Mr. Cassidy was real clever with the English language.

"The estate belongs to Isabelle and Bernard Collier." She sighed. "They were Matthew Hadrinham's stepchildren; Matthew was Esther's brother. He married a white woman, which was something of a scandal in its day. All the same, they were the only family Esther had." She glanced at her watch. "And they're due any time now. The will was finally settled two days ago."

"But Mr. Hornton said Miss Hadrinham died over two years ago."

"You are a delightful boy. So unspoiled, so innocent," she said, and I was glad I was up on the ladder, otherwise she might

have pinched my cheeks. "It took over two years for the estate to go through probate, Herbert dear. The state, the law, they both move so slowly. I am the executor of Esther's estate, and I confess it has been the most exhausting experience of my life."

"Executor. That means you're in charge."

"Unfortunately, yes. I wanted Esther to appoint someone else, perhaps Elmer, but she insisted on me."

When I looked over again, Mr. Hornton had gone. I saw my chance then and, climbing down the ladder, followed Mrs. Rollins across the room. She placed the small set of Robinson poetry into a box on the rickety-looking little table by the windows.

"How did Miss Hadrinham die?" I asked. "If you don't mind telling me?"

"Of course I don't mind." She smiled, sighed, and moved around the table, putting her hand down on the slingback chair next to it. Behind her the sky was growing gray; the sun had already slipped down behind the trees at the far edge of the bay.

"This is where Esther sat to read and write." She rested her other hand on a pile of books on the table. "We haven't even

touched these yet, have we? This is how she left them."

I looked at the books, six of them, and read the names off the spines. *Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain; *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll; *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker; *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather. Those I had all heard of, but the last two I was unfamiliar with—*Brat Farrar*, by Josephine Tey, and *Ann Vickers*, by Sinclair Lewis. Each book had a slip of paper in it, evidently marking where Miss Hadrinham had been reading. But she'd been reading six books? All at the same time?

"These will have to go, too, I suppose. Esther had such eclectic taste." Mrs. Rollins gave me a sharp look. "Do you know what that word means, Herbert?"

"Sure." I tried not to sound too insulted. "She liked to read all kinds of different stuff."

"Indeed she did." She looked almost weary. Perhaps she'd been doing too much, or maybe what she was about to tell me was especially difficult. "Esther died from an allergic reaction, Herbert. I don't know if you understand what I mean. The poor dear was allergic to insect bites. She was home here alone that day, on a Sunday, three years ago this September thirtieth. She was planting tulip

bulbs. She did love flowers so, but she had to be very careful. Oh, you should see Salvage Hill in the spring. It's so beautiful. There are hyacinths and jonquils, Japanese iris, and, of course, the tulips." She paused, sighed again. "Anyhow, she was planting down by the seawall. Can you see it from here?" She moved to the windows and pointed toward the beach. A black-backed gull was strutting back and forth along the top of the seawall, and I could just barely make out where a small flower garden was located, right where the edge of the lawn met it. "She dug down into a bees' nest, Herbert. There was no one home with her. Ben and Bernice Soaper, her gardener and housekeeper, had gone out, and Esther should have known better. She shouldn't have been planting those bulbs, but she was a stubborn woman. She'd always done as she liked, and that day . . . well, that day wasn't going to be any different. The Soapers found her that evening. Esther had died of a heart attack, brought on by being stung by bees."

How dramatic. How strange. How wildly inaccurate.

"She dug into a bees' nest?" I asked. "Bumblebees?"

"Oh no, those nasty little ones with the black and yellow

stripes? Not honeybees, no, what we've always called them is yellow jackets."

"Yellow jackets," I echoed. "They're not bees. They're wasps."

"Whatever. They had a nest right at the top of the seawall where some of the rocks are a little loose. Apparently she disturbed them. Oh, Esther had a kit, of course." She moved away from the windows as if the memory were too terrible to bear. "I gave her one of those . . . those things young people wear around their waists, you know, like a purse, to carry her medical kit in."

"A fanny pack."

"Whatever they are. It was to keep her things in. Esther was never one for a purse or handbag. So she kept her tissues in it, some cough drops, a bit of lipstick, her house keys, but for some reason she had taken her medical kit out. It had her . . . her needles in it."

"I have a friend at school who has one. The needles are called epi-pens."

"Whatever. She left it inside. Oh, but Esther was getting old, and maybe she just forgot." She paused again, and I was feeling sorry I'd asked about it. "Maybe." She bit her bottom lip. "Bernice Soaper found the kit on the kitchen table. It was

a sad and tragic ending for such a wonderful, wonderful lady."

"Yeah, I guess so."

She gave me a quick, funny look.

"It must have been terrible."

"Of course it was! Imagine the poor thing lying there, being stung! Her face and arms were covered with welts. Oh, she deserved a better end, Herbert, as we all will. Now, let's do something more pleasant, shall we? Let's make you a box of books. I'm sure Elmer will approve. In fact, we should have been doing that all along. Let's start with this one." And with that she picked up *Tom Sawyer* from the table.

"Why, I think that's an absolutely splendid idea!" cried a voice as a tall woman with short-cropped gray hair strode purposefully into the room and marched toward us.

But to this woman I needed no introduction; this woman I knew. This was Miss Collier, and not only did she teach eighth grade English at my school, she was my study hall teacher, too.

I couldn't have been more surprised had Mr. Locks himself walked in.

I got home late that night, going into the house to the sounds of laughter. Jake was there, and he and Mom

sounded like they were having a good old time. Mr. Hornton had called her a while ago, told her I'd be late and that he'd pick us up some burgers on the way home.

Don't get me wrong. I was glad Mom and Jake were dating. Mom had more life and vitality lately than I'd seen in her for years. But for a moment I was just plain mad, hearing them laugh, seeing how happy they were when my head was so crammed with stuff.

"Snowstorm tonight, Herbie? Can you believe it?" Jake said to me as I walked past the both of them, the box of books from Mrs. Rollins in my arms. I dropped it on the coffee table in the living room.

"Great," I said sarcastically. "Maybe I can skip my homework then."

"Herbie?" Mom was always too sensitive . . . too discerning. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's just great, Mom," I replied in the same snide tone. "I've been helping sort, stamp, and catalogue books for four hours now, books that belonged to Miss Esther Hadrinham." I was informing *her*, but I was watching Jake's face. He was sitting at the kitchen table just behind her, a can of beer in his hand. He was a big man, not really fat, just big. All the same, he didn't

need to drink all that beer. "You know the one I mean, Jake? The lady who got stung to death, two, almost three years ago? The lady who just happened to 'forget' to take her bee-sting kit outside with her while she was planting tulip bulbs? Crazy, huh? And have you seen her house?" This was still addressed to Jake, who continued to stare at me. "Big old place, worth a million dollars, I'd bet, and it all goes to guess who? My study hall teacher and her brother. Can you believe it?"

"Listen, Herbie, I think I know what you're implying, but Esther Hadrinham was eighty years old. She forgot to take her kit outside with her. It's that simple."

"That simple?" I was getting itchy, which wasn't good, and my head was buzzing along at ninety miles an hour. Hell on wheels? I didn't know, just knew I had to say this, get it off my chest. "Is anything that simple, Jake? Is it? Is it?"

The kitchen and living room of the house we were renting were small, all one room actually. Mom was standing by the refrigerator, staring at me with an uneasy look I'd seen before, and Jake . . . well, Jake was strangely quiet. Were they going to let me finish my speech? I guessed they were.

"Who investigated this one, Jake? Because I think . . . no, I know they overlooked a lot. This whole thing is fishy from start to finish. A lady who's *allergic* to bees digs right down into a—"

He cut me off. "A special investigator was appointed by the county D.A., Herbie. I was asked to assist. It was ruled an accidental death, all very straightforward. She was just a forgetful eighty-year-old woman. It's that simple. Not everyone who dies has been murdered."

"Damn," I muttered, sorry I said it, but I could feel myself shaking as I went on. "Just a forgetful eighty-year-old woman? And that explains it? And what if they found me dead somewhere, stung by bees, what excuse would you use for me? That I was just a forgetful thirteen-year-old kid?"

"Herbie!" Mom cried out. "That's enough. I don't like your tone at all."

But I had already turned away from them, gone storming across the living room and out onto the porch, slamming the door behind me. It was cold out there, and I thought the weathermen might actually be right this time. It did feel like snow. We don't get very much snow on the Cape, but when we get it, it can turn into a virtual

whiteout. A good chance there'd be no school tomorrow.

Inside I could hear Jake calming Mom down. "Now, Emily, take it easy. I've got two boys myself, and believe me, they're twenty times worse than Herbie. I'll talk to him."

I heard the porch door open, close quietly. I was steaming, but had my arms wound around myself. The porch was heated, but Mom had the thermostat turned way down. We were responsible for all the utilities, part of the deal which kept our rent low.

"It doesn't feel right, Jake. It doesn't fit together."

"Herbie, let me tell you something." I heard the creak of a chair as he sat down. "Esther Hadrinham was eighty years old, and when you get that old you tend to forget things, even important things. According to her niece, she'd had several episodes of forgetfulness in the weeks before her death. Misplacing her keys, going out to lunch without taking money, that sort of thing. There was never any medical diagnosis of senility or Alzheimer's; just the same, what happened happened, period. Now, I know you'd like to believe some kind of foul play occurred, but that's not the way it was. Accidents happen, and one happened to Esther Hadrinham."

"Now let me remind you of something." I wouldn't look at him. "If you wanted to get rid of someone, you could not only make it look like an accident, you could set up an accident to happen, couldn't you? An old lady, allergic to bees and wasps, digging out in a garden, goes right into a wasps' nest? Wouldn't her housekeeper or gardener know it was there? And get rid of it? Or at least tell her—"

He interrupted me again. "Ben Soaper was her gardener, and he was questioned. Both he and his wife had been with Miss Hadrinham for over fifty years. They were absolutely devoted to her, and devastated by her death. Ben knew there were wasps moving around; he'd told her to be careful until he could find the nest, but he hadn't—"

My turn to cut him off. "He should have looked until he found it! Or . . . or maybe he lied, Jake! Did you think about that?" I turned around to look at him.

"Herbie. Listen. Twice you've stumbled into things you shouldn't have. Twice, but that's it. Those other times were coincidences maybe, or just plain bad luck. But this isn't another one. This woman died two and a half years ago, tragically yes, but accidentally

as well. A full investigation was done. The family was extremely distraught, but they, and we, were completely satisfied with what we found."

"That family is filthy rich now. Even with all the money going to Manamesset and the hospice in Northport. Filthy rich. Salvage Hill? You've seen it?"

"The entire family is made up of two people, a niece and a nephew—"

"Stepniece and stepnephew."

He sighed. "Who were doing all right on their own. The nephew owns a very profitable import-export business on Long Island. I doubt he needed his aunt's money. The niece is Miss Collier, a teacher at the high school."

"I know *her*, for crying out loud. She's my study hall teacher, and she teaches one class at my school, eighth grade Honors English."

"And that's it. Isabelle Collier isn't a rich woman or she'd hardly be teaching school, would she? But she's far from poor. She and her brother both have trust funds they can draw from. They were set up by their grandfather, Ezra Hadrinham."

"Stepgrandfather," I added sharply.

"Herbie, you've got to let go of this." His eyes narrowed down, and he fumbled in his jacket as if searching for a cigarette. Then he sighed and looked into the house. He wasn't smoking any more, or at least that's what my mother thought.

"But couldn't there be other suspects, Jake? Did you check the Soapers' alibis carefully? I bet they got something from the will, didn't they? And then there's a Mrs. Rollins."

"And your friend, Elmer Hornton?" he shot back at me. "He was left a small amount, too, plus the freedom to go through Esther Hadrinham's library, wasn't he?"

He'd caught me there. I sucked in a quick breath. "It still feels wrong, Jake. A lady who's allergic to bees just doesn't go outside, even in September, without taking precautions."

"She was getting up there, Herbie. Accidents *do* happen." He shook his head. I knew how he felt; we were going around and around in circles, getting nowhere. But I had one thing more to say. "I don't care how forgetful you are, unless you do have Alzheimer's you aren't going to leave your house without your bee-sting kit. It's the one thing you'd *have* to remember.

You'd have to take it *everywhere*."

"Look, if it'll make you feel any better . . ." He was giving in slowly, reluctantly, but then again maybe he was recalling the other two cases I'd "helped" him on. "I'll talk to the fellow I worked on the investigation with, and I'll pull the files and reread them. All right?"

It was the most hollow-sounding promise I'd ever heard.

"Yeah, Jake, that'd be great." But my enthusiasm sounded equally as hollow.

Miss Collier. The scourge of Period 6 Study Hall on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She who taught the Honors eighth graders (which I was in imminent danger of becoming).

She was also English Department chairman at the high school, and the daughter of Esther Hadrinham's brother's wife by her first marriage. I have to admit I had been surprised that she was the Miss Collier Mrs. Rollins had talked about. From what I knew of Miss Collier (and from my observations of Mr. Cassidy as he was being observed by Miss Collier), she was an individual who was respected, admired, and just a little bit feared. De-

spite that, she seemed a happy enough person, always smiling, even when throwing an unruly student out of study hall, one of those teachers who really get into their jobs. One time I even overheard Mr. Locks and Mr. Cassidy talking about Miss Collier. (They were doing corridor duty; I was pretending to have trouble with my locker.) According to Mr. Cassidy, Miss Collier "was getting full of herself," now that she had gotten a short story published in some local literary magazine. Then the two of them had noticed me standing there and changed their conversation to how the Bruins were doing.

Teachers. They must think all us kids are deaf and blind and stupid. We're supposed to be so "attentive" in class, but out in the hall we're not supposed to see or hear a thing. Anyhow, this had been that same Miss Collier, helping Mrs. Rollins make a box of books for me.

"We'll start with *Tom Sawyer*. It's such a marvelous book." Miss Collier had picked it up from the pile on the table. "It's also part of the English curriculum in grade eight. You'll have a wonderful advantage over your classmates if you read it now, and you do read, don't you, Herbert? Oh, Maudie, he always has his nose

in a book." Then Miss Collier gave Mrs. Rollins a quick explanation of how she knew me. To me she said, "Wouldn't that be wonderful? Oh, we'll pick out some lovely books for you."

"Wonderful," I muttered, trying not to be too sarcastic. Actually, I was looking around for Mr. Hornton. It was starting to get real dark; wasn't it time we got going?

"Oh, look, Maudie, isn't this just too sad? Aunt Esther had her place marked in each of them. She was reading six books at once? And at her age."

"She told me she wanted to visit with her old friends . . . her favorite books . . . one more time," Mrs. Rollins said sadly, dabbing at her eyes.

"Oh, she didn't," Miss Collier said, dabbing at her eyes, too.

I'd really had enough, was looking around for Mr. Hornton, wondering if I could ask to use the bathroom, when Mrs. Rollins said, "Oh, look, Isabelle, one of those pocket calendars." Mrs. Rollins had taken it from one of the books; evidently Miss Hadrinham had been using it as a bookmark. "Three years old now. No good to anyone, I suppose."

"Nonsense!" Miss Collier exclaimed, taking it from Mrs. Rollins. It had flowers and swans across its cover, plus the name of the local bank that had

given it away. She flipped through it quickly, then said, "So it's old. It's hardly been used. Now wouldn't it make a nice little assignment book, Herbert? You could just scratch out the old dates. Here, I'll tuck it in with your books."

"Great," I muttered as I thought, flowers and swans, that's something I really need. Mr. Hornton didn't arrive to rescue me for another twenty minutes.

"Look at this," I said to Mr. Hornton with total disgust. We had been on our way home, barreling down the dirt road leading away from Salvage Hill. "This one, *Tom Sawyer*, is not so bad, and I can probably get through some of these Jules Verne books. But they wanted to give me *Alice in Wonderland*, too."

Mr. Hornton was quiet, slowing down a little. The road was dark, winding, unpaved.

"Can you imagine? A kid my age, reading something like that?"

"Why don't you read it?" Mr. Hornton finally said.

"What?"

"Why *don't* you read it? Maybe it'll learn you something."

"Oh, come on, Mr. Hornton. It's a kid's book. In fact, most of the books they stuffed in here

are kids' books or things I'd never read. *Gulliver's Travels*? *Two Years Before the Mast*? What do they think I am—ten years old?"

"First of all, Herbert," he said gruffly, "each of those books was written for adults, including Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. And second of all, what difference does it make who they were written for? As long as they're good. And all of them are good. Damn, in some ways I wish I was you, Herbie, discovering those stories for the first time. It's like a great adventure. Read them. You'll never regret it, mark my words."

"You've read all these, haven't you?"

It was dark in the cab of the truck; we were just hitting the main road, but I could see his smile: sly, shrewd, clever.

"All right," I said, "Maybe I will. But not *Alice in Wonderland*. Come on, Mr. Hornton, a white rabbit and a little girl? Get real."

He laughed. "Get real? I think that's just what Lewis Carroll was questioning in his book, what is *real*? I thought you liked that fellow who made all those funny drawings, what's-his-name, Eesher or—"

"M. C. Escher," I grunted. "That's different."

He just laughed again, and I slid down in the passenger's seat. The box Miss Collier and Mrs. Rollins had made for me dropped onto the floor.

The snowstorm never amounted to much, just a light dusting of snow sprinkled like confectioners' sugar all over the trees. We had school, and I was glad I'd stayed up late to finish my homework. But the day was long and dull as only the very worst days of junior high can be. Mr. Cassidy spent forty minutes teaching us about pronouns; Miss Andrews in science wasted our time talking about atomic bonding, followed by a pop quiz; Miss Mir-elle showed us a movie on Spain we all slept through; in gym we had a substitute and just messed around, and in Mrs. Jordan's math class we had a killer test on fractions and percents. Then, right after lunch, came study hall.

I wasn't looking forward to seeing Miss Collier again, but there she was, and then here she came, marching purposefully across the cafeteria where study hall was held in her trademark high heels, tight black skirt, and matching, lace-collared blouse.

"Well, Herbert Sawyer, Jr.," she announced in her loud, study hall voice, "just what

book have you decided to start with?"

She caught me off guard, but only for a second. In a way, I was ready for her, had stuffed *Tom Sawyer* down into my bag, figuring it wouldn't hurt any for her to see me reading it. Gather your brownie points where you may, so to speak.

"*Tom Sawyer*, Miss Collier," I said, whipping the book out, laying it on the table I was assigned to. A few lazy heads were turning my way, wondering perhaps why Miss Collier was talking to me. Generally speaking, she ignored us, left attendance and most supervisory duties to the wiry little French teacher who shared study hall with her.

A sly grin crept over her face and her eyes crinkled up. *She knew*. But all she said was, "Excellent choice," and then marched back across the cafeteria.

Good for at least a brownie point or two.

But strange, isn't it, how things can turn on the smallest details, that things barely noticed at one time can become really important later on. That's how it was for me. I had walked into study hall in a kind of stupor, still disappointed the snow hadn't amounted to much and exhausted from listening to one

deadly boring teacher after another.

But when I left to go to my last period class (Mr. Locks' social studies in Room 4), I wasn't tired at all. . . .

No, suddenly my head was buzzing along at a thousand miles an hour.

I have to admit I had given what Jake said to me last night a lot of thought. I had considered the possibility that I was just overreacting, that I was seeing murder where an accident was the only plausible explanation. Because people do make mistakes, and even intelligent people can forget to do what they should *never* forget to do. And she was eighty, and she was stubborn and she shouldn't have been planting tulip bulbs, alone, where there might be bees or wasps or anything that might sting. But she didn't care, or thought she was immune to bad luck, accidents, a twist of fate, whatever you want to call it.

But that wasn't where my mind was when Mr. Locks called on me; no, not at all.

"Mr. Herbert Sawyer?"

My books were open. I had my atlas out. I had my colored pencils lined up on my desk. I was ready for class, or rather for the charade of looking like I was ready for class. The prob-

lem was that Mr. Locks was too sharp, had seen right through my charade. Before I could speak, he had reached for the drawing I had partially hidden under the map of the Middle East.

"Is this part of the assignment I just gave the class?" he asked.

I looked up at him, surprised, embarrassed. He held in his hand my social studies notebook; the problem was there weren't any social studies notes in it. Nothing from the board and nothing about the assignment the rest of the class were bending their heads to . . . no, what I had was a full page of wasps, yellow jackets, in particular.

And beneath each drawing of a yellow jacket I had written a capital letter *B*. And beneath that I'd added: "Who is *B*? Ben Soaper, the gardener? Bernice Soaper, the housekeeper? Bernard Collier, the stepnephew? How many other *B*'s are there?"

"Are you working on science in my class, Mr. Sawyer?" Mr. Locks asked me. His voice was low; he was actually quite a good teacher. He never tried to embarrass you in front of the other kids, not unless he had to, that is. But now he was looking down at my drawings. He should have been looking down

at a neatly colored map of the Middle East, yellow for desert regions, green for forests, a nice deep shade of blue for rivers and tributaries.

"No, sir, Mr. Locks, no," I mumbled.

"Then where is your assignment?"

What did I tell the man? If he'd been Jake, or maybe even Mr. Hornton, I might have told him this: Look, I just discovered something in study hall, something I have to tell the police about immediately. Something Jake isn't going to believe, not for a minute.

Instead, I was mumbling my way through some flimsy excuse. "I'm sorry. I guess my mind just isn't on social studies . . . on the Middle East . . . today."

Mr. Locks could have given me detention; he could have given me a lecture. He just put the notebook on my desk, wasp-side down, and pointed to the blackboard.

"Get started, Mr. Sawyer, and get started now."

Then he turned and walked over to Chuckie Moses' seat. Chuckie was the smartest kid in class, did the neatest work, was almost like a robot he was so perfect.

But a kid like Chuckie never questioned Mr. Locks, not like I did. Time after time I pestered

Mr. Locks with questions about apartheid, the conflict in Northern Ireland, and why the Israelis and all their neighbors can't just get along. Why, in general, does the world have to be so messed up, Mr. Locks? I guess that was the gist of every question I asked in his class.

And Mr. Locks was enduringly patient, answering—to the best of his ability and knowledge—every one of my questions. So maybe I could have told him what I was really thinking about, could have told him I'd found something in Miss Esther Hadrinham's pocket calendar, something that was wrong, disturbing, or, at the very least, hard to figure.

I had been in study hall last period, trying to impress Miss Collier, making a great show of starting *Tom Sawyer*, when that stupid pocket calendar dropped out of the book and onto the floor. Someone looked over, and I scooped the thing up quick. It was just an ordinary bank calendar, with stupid flowers and swans all over the cover. I should have thrown it out earlier, but I'd forgotten it was stuck in the book.

I waited until the curious eyes turned away, then I flipped it open.

I don't know why I did. It was a cheap thing, the kind with spaces about an inch square for

each day of the month. Plenty of room to write down appointments, things you have to do maybe.

I had opened it to March 1990, and I thought to myself: you were only in the fourth grade then, and you were in the fifth grade when she died.

March 1990. A couple of Thursdays marked "Dr. Y. 2:30." On Sunday the fourth and also the eighteenth: "Ch. Mtg. 3:00." On Monday the twenty-sixth: "Lib. Tru. Mtg. 7:00."

For an eighty-year-old woman, she seemed to have had a fairly active life.

Remarkably so. And she was probably not so forgetful as Jake had tried to make me believe, either. I flipped to April. Three doctor's appointments, a hairdresser's appointment, two church meetings, a church supper, and one "Lib. Tru. Mtg." Near the end of the month was a notation that said: "B, for lunch."

Then the obvious occurred to me and I flipped to September. And there it was, on Saturday, September twenty-ninth, the day before she died. There it was, written in what looked like blue felt-tip pen, words that stayed with me through Mr. Locks' meticulous directions and right up to the moment he stood beside my desk

and looked down at the half-dozen yellow jackets I'd been doodling. There, in the little pocket calendar, were these words: "B. came. Killed the bees."

That wasn't all. On the next day, the last day of September, the day Miss Esther Hadrinham died, was this single word: "Tulips."

I flipped ahead to October. Two doctor's appointments, one church meeting, one library trustee meeting. Appointments she never lived to meet.

Yes, I wished I could have told Mr. Locks what I knew, what Jake hadn't known, what probably no one, including the person who had murdered her, could even guess at: that Miss Hadrinham had left a written record who had killed her. "B" had killed her. "B" had come to kill the bees, the yellow jackets, which were really wasps. But unfortunately, "B" didn't do that—and here was the whole crux of the matter, and the one assumption I was making that led to the inevitable conclusion she'd been murdered: "B" had told her he had killed the bees.

Miss Hadrinham had gone out that fine September day thinking the "bees" in the nest in the seawall were dead. She never would have done so otherwise; the proof was in the cal-

endar. So the killer had lied, told her the bees—the yellow jackets—were killed. And that same person had probably taken the bee-sting kit out of Miss Hadrinham's fanny pack and left it on the kitchen table, no doubt, to make it look as though the old lady had simply forgotten it.

I couldn't wait to tell Jake.

Mr. Hornton was waiting for me. There was more bad weather coming, but this time no one was listening to those stupid weathermen on TV. According to the U.S. Weather Service, we were getting rain all along the coast.

All the same, Mom was insisting I take my heavy down coat, saying, "It's waterproof. Either way you'll be fine. You won't get cold or wet."

"Good idea, Emily," Mr. Hornton said. He had just set a large bucket of oysters, Jake's favorite, on the table. Jake was coming for supper, and I was hoping I'd see him before I went back to Salvage Hill with Mr. Hornton. I had the little pocket calendar wearing a hole in my hip pocket—I kept shoving my hand in to make sure it hadn't fallen out.

The truth was I felt torn in two—I wanted to see Jake, but I also wanted to go back to Sal-

vage Hill, the scene of the crime. I had no concern about my safety; I'd be with Mr. Hornton. Besides, the murderer had no idea the pocket calendar even existed. No, what I wanted to do was tell Jake.

But if I did tell Jake, he might insist I stay home. Maybe he'd start rounding up everyone who had known Miss Hadrinham whose name began with a B. Maybe.

"I'm going to call Jake later, Mom," I told her as I hefted my schoolbag up onto my shoulder. That had been part of the deal; Mom had said I could go help at Salvage Hill again if I did my homework first. "You tell him that? Tell him it's *real* important."

"Of course," she said, reaching out to touch my hair. "And you behave. I just hope the storm isn't as bad as the man on Channel 8 said."

Mr. Hornton snorted disdainfully, shook his head. "Ain't going to be no snow, Emily. When have those damned weathermen got it right this winter? Just rain. Now we got to get along. Maudie Rollins, she's promising us a nice big dinner. I got more oysters for her in my truck." Then he gave my mom a quick wink. "You have a real nice evening here, you and your fellow."

I swear to God Mom almost blushed. Then she smiled, and Mr. Hornton and I were on our way back to Salvage Hill.

"You're itching like a dog with a fur full of fleas," Mr. Hornton said as we sped down Bayview Road toward Salvage Hill. The skies were a deep dense gray, not a normal, mid-winter gray but a stormy mid-winter gray. I could feel the snow in the air; in just the last hour the temperature had dropped a good five degrees. I could also feel the tension in me. Was I, *were we*, driving to a house with a murderer in it?

"Big test tomorrow is all. If we have school. I'm just hoping—" I looked at him, felt uneasy lying, "—we have no school, that's all."

"Oh, hell." He turned onto Old Bayview Road. "You'll have school. Ain't gonna be no snow, Herbie. It's already turning to rain south of us. All to rain."

Mrs. Rollins met us with her usual effusive gushiness and sent me down to the library, saying she had a whole stack on the floor by the computer, just waiting for me. Ben Soaper had emptied out the science section, she said, and they all needed stamping and sorting. She was going to take Elmer

out to the kitchen for a minute so he could sample the bouillabaisse she was making for supper.

So I went ahead by myself, schoolbag slung over my shoulder, jacket under my arm. I supposed there was a chance I was being overdramatic, thinking there could be a murderer in the house. Yeah, right.

When I got to the library's double doors, they were wide open. I paused. Two people were already in there.

"Dropping down dead drunk again," came a woman's high-pitched voice. "Bernard disgusts me so much I can barely stand to be in the same room with him."

"Brenda, dear, you knew what you were getting into when you married my brother." That was Miss Collier, her voice full of the same tired patience she used on us kids in study hall.

"Just the same, I'll be glad when this place is sold and we can start to pull ourselves back together."

I could see the second speaker as she moved into the light by the windows. She was tall, pencil thin, moving back and forth restlessly, waving a long, thin hand in the air. In her other hand she held a cigarette.

"I've told you, Brenda, *dear*," Miss Collier said, her voice absolutely straining with patience. I knew that voice, too. "I do not intend to sell Salvage Hill."

"Then you'll have to buy us out, Isabelle. Bernard and I need the cash." The woman's hand flashed back and forth in the window, through which I could see a smattering of snowflakes. "We've barely been able to hang on the last two years as it is. I swear I thought it would never end. Besides, why do you want to live way out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"As I have told you before," there was icy resolve in Miss Collier's voice, "I plan to write, Brenda. I plan to write and use Salvage Hill—and the bay—as my inspiration."

"For God's sake, Isabelle! A good writer can write anywhere."

That's when I made a sound; the bookbag was heavy and had slipped from my shoulder onto the floor. The two women turned in unison.

"Who's there?" the woman named Brenda demanded. "Who's *that*?"

"Mr. Herbert Sawyer, a friend of Elmer Hornton's, here to assist in going through Aunt Esther's books."

"Books!" Brenda Collier screeched. She turned, and I

got a better look at her. Older than I had imagined, maybe mid-thirties, and wearing one of those funny suits a lot of older women wear now: a baggy, oversized sweater over stretch tights or leggings, or as Mrs. Rollins would say, over whatever.

"Books," she said again. "I'm sick to death of all this talk about books! Except for a few first editions, most of them aren't worth the paper they're written on. Aunt Esther put her money into worthless, pointless causes. Take that hospital over in Northwood . . ."

"Hospice," Miss Collier corrected her, still like a teacher. "In Northport."

"Oh, damn!" Brenda Collier snapped, staring down at her hand. "I just broke another nail. This has been a miserable day, and now there's a storm coming? I swear to God, Isabelle, if I get stuck out here in the middle of nowhere—"

With that, Mrs. Bernard Collier went out past me, complaining about the weather, the food ("Bouillabaise? You know I hate seafood!"), the house, the company. . .

Miss Collier gave me a sympathetic smile, waved me in, then followed her sister-in-law out.

I sat down at the computer, kicking my bookbag and jacket

under the table as I did. Brenda Collier? Another "B"? Yes, a likely suspect if ever there was one, except for one thing: I just didn't think she was smart enough to pull off a murder. Not by a long shot.

I worked on my math for a while, and when Mr. Hornton showed up, we started on the pile of books Ben Soaper had taken down from the shelves on the second story of the room. Meanwhile, outside, the gray skies were blossoming with small hydrogen-bomb clouds and spitting rain like crazy. I remembered Miss Andrews' lecture from earlier that morning. Hydrogen explodes. Just a little spark and it blows up. And boy, didn't those clouds out there look as though they could explode and dump a ton of snow on us any minute now?

But no, Mr. Hornton insisted it was "going to stay rain now; no snow t'all," something I really didn't believe when I called home to see if Jake had gotten there yet. But I said the same thing to Mom, assuring her that Mr. Hornton would bring me home straight away if things started to look really bad out.

After I convinced her of that, she told me Jake had been delayed at the station but was promising to be at the house by

seven. I was a little disappointed, though it gave me time to think things over. After I hung up, I stood in the hall outside the library and watched the rain against the stained-glass windows and just thought.

So Brenda Collier made a pretty poor suspect for a murderer? But what about her husband, Bernard? He certainly had a motive, didn't he? How would Jake like to know that Mr. Import-Export had a cash-flow problem?

When I went back to rejoin Mr. Hornton, my brain was buzzing along near the speed of light.

Mr. Hornton and I continued to work our way through the science books, reference books mostly. I stamped them and handed each over to Mr. Hornton, who catalogued them into the computer. I was watching the rain—still no sign of snow—and must have been in a kind of daze because it was Mr. Hornton who noticed the book first. It got right past me.

"Well, looky here, Herbie," he said, turning the large black volume in his hand. "I think we got a criminal in the house. What do you think?"

The word jarred me, and for a moment I was confused, couldn't speak.

"Maudie, come over and take a look at this," he said, and walked over to meet her. She'd been working in poetry and literature across the room. Their heads went together as they looked down at the book, but I understood, too. I had just found another one, a book that had already been stamped inside, with the words "University of New Hampshire." The book's title: *Entomology, Physiology and Function*. The "criminal" was whoever had stolen or forgotten to return the books, all of which had an overdue date of May 8, 1972.

"Bernard," Mrs. Rollins informed us. "Bernard Collier. Can you believe it? Twenty years ago and he never returned it."

"Them, Mrs. Rollins," I told her soberly. "I've got six more here. All on the same subject."

She had opened the book in her hand, said, "Bugs?"

"Yeah, bugs," I answered. Or entomology, the scientific study of insects. Of course, who else would you ask to kill the "bees" in a wasps' nest but the step-nephew who had apparently studied the subject twenty years ago?

Of course. Finally the buzzing in my brain came to a screeching halt.

*

So I had it all figured out. Yes, I told myself as I enjoyed my bouillabaisse and rolls at the kitchen table. I had even gotten a look at the murderer, too. Bernard Collier had stumbled into the kitchen looking for his wife, then stumbled right back out again. When his wife came in a few minutes later, she announced in a highly disgusted and ironic tone, "He's passed out. Again. I tell you, I'm not taking any more of his crap. I'm going to bed." As she went out the door, we heard a final moan: "Damn it, this place doesn't even get cable. What am I supposed to do—read?"

"Dreadful hobby Bernard had as a little boy," Mrs. Rollins told us as she ladled out a third helping of soup for Mr. Hornton. "Always bringing nasty things into the house, bugs in little bottles, beetles in shoeboxes, horrid things. And Esther indulged him. Imagine, she actually *paid* for him to study bugs in college."

Miss Collier had been standing over by the counter, filling mugs from a coffeemaker. She chose that moment to turn and look at me with that even, dagger-eyed stare she and so many teachers have honed to perfection. "Not all families are perfect, Herbert. I hope you won't find the need to repeat any of this at school?"

"I'm not a gossip, Miss Collier," I answered truthfully.

"Herbie's a damn fine boy. If he says he'll keep something to himself, then he will." That was Mr. Hornton, always on my side.

Miss Collier gave me a pained-looking smile, and I found myself feeling really sorry for her. She'd lost her aunt, now she had to tolerate her drunken brother and his obnoxious wife.

"Mr. Locks does speak highly of you," she told me, "and I have the highest regard for him, such a lovely man."

Funny, I had never thought of Mr. Locks as a "lovely man," but if they all thought so much of me, there was no way I'd tell anyone at school that Miss Collier's brother was a drunk—I was having a hard enough time wondering how she was going to take the news that he was a murderer as well.

"Rain, what'd I tell you?" Mr. Hornton was zipping up his windbreaker as I continued to pile books into cardboard boxes, each one labeled "Manamesset Public Library." Sure enough, rain was hitting the library windows all around us like BB pellets. "Now, you're sure you'll be all right for a

while? Maudie and me won't be more'n an hour. I just can't figure how I left those disks back at the house. Damn, must be getting forgetful in my old age."

"It happens," I told him, and then, "I'll be fine. I'll get a lot done."

I sure would. I was planning to call home again in a little while, tell Jake that he was wrong and I was right, again, and that I knew for sure who had lied to Miss Hadrinham, who had maybe pretended to kill the yellow jackets so she'd go out the next day and dig into the nest and die. I was so sure it was Bernard Collier, positive I had the proof still tucked in my hip pocket. In fact, everything was turning out so simple it was scary.

So I figured I'd let Mom and Jake have their supper, then call, and maybe even gloat over the phone a little, stretch things out a bit, let Jake figure it out the same way I had. I had all the evidence I needed, didn't I? The entomology books, the fact that Bernard Collier had known about insects since he was a kid, and, most of all, the calendar. Now all Jake needed to do was a little research, prove Bernard Collier had been out here that day, September 29, 1990, maybe find someone who'd seen him here, or find he

had rented a car up from Long Island, or bought airline tickets . . . or bus tickets? Weren't he and his wife hard up for cash?

Then Jake would lay all this evidence right before him, force him to confess. That part was all Jake's, but being a professional, he could handle it. I had the utmost confidence in my good old police friend, Jake Valari.

I was still stamping books when Mr. Hornton and Mrs. Rollins went out. Brenda Collier had gone up to bed an hour ago. Bernard Collier—the killer—was still sleeping on the living room sofa. The Soapers, Ben and Bernice (too many B's!), had gone home for the night. I didn't know where Miss Collier had gone.

The rain outside was drifting into a thick something that was hitting against the library windows. Sleet? I watched it for a moment; it was making a slick *thump-thump-thump* against the windows, then running down the glass like rain.

Oh, what the heck: I'd never been very patient. I couldn't wait any longer—I went to give Jake another call.

"Jesus Christ, Herbie," Jake bellowed over the phone. "Why didn't you tell me about this calendar thing before?"

"I just found out today," I told him. "You didn't do a very good investigation the first—"

"Good thing you're on the other end of a phone line because I'd like to grab you and . . . oh," Jake's voice softened suddenly. "Just Herbie on the phone. Everything's fine." Then back to me: "Do something for me, Herbie. I want you to read exactly what it says for September twenty-ninth and thirtieth."

"Sure." It was no problem. I'd been sitting curled up in a wing chair set just outside the library's double doors. The phone was there, an old fashioned black dial phone on a small writing desk. But as I pulled the calendar out of my pocket I looked across the hall and through the blue wings of a stained glass angel. It was still raining sleet, from what I could see, but it seemed heavier, thicker.

"Okay, Jake? Here goes. September twenty-ninth, 'B. came. Killed the bees.' And then on September thirtieth just the one word, 'Tulips.'"

There was silence on the other end. A long silence. I could hear my breathing in the phone, then a crackle. Was Jake turning the pages?

"So tell me, Jake? You did go and get that report, didn't you?"

What does it say? Was there ever any suspicion about—”

He interrupted me. “Are there any other references to ‘B’ in that thing?” His voice was suddenly hard, gruff, and not one to argue with.

So much for gloating. “Wait a minute.” I flipped through the calendar. “Nothing in January, just a bunch of doctor’s appointments, a library meeting, two church meetings. February. Yeah, Jake, February twenty-second it says, ‘B, overnight.’”

“Good boy, Herbie. Any more?”

I started to get excited. Was he collecting more evidence against Bernard Collier?

“Nothing like that in March. Okay, April twenty-fourth it says, ‘B, for lunch.’”

“Keep going.”

And I did. Nothing in April or May, but the last week of June said, “B, for week.”

And then nothing again, until September twenty-ninth. No mention of “B” the rest of the year.

“Okay, Herbie, tell me this, who’s out there with you now?”

“Mrs. Collier, she’s gone to bed. Miss Collier, my study hall teacher. I don’t know where she is, but she’s somewhere around. Mr. Collier, he’s asleep, drunk, in the living room. You coming out to arrest him?”

“Where’s Elmer Hornton?”

“Gone home for some disks. He and Mrs. Rollins left about twenty minutes ago, but he’s coming right back.”

“The hell he is.”

“Jake?”

“Look out the window, Herbie. I’m coming to get you now.”

I looked back through the angel’s pale blue wings. Snow.

There are all kinds of snow on Cape Cod. There’s the light stuff that can’t make up its mind—it goes from rain to sleet to snow and back, but usually settles on rain. Then there are snow squalls with big fat flakes that come and go real quick but never amount to much. The worst kind was this, the kind that comes up from the south, starts out as rain, then meets a cold front diving down from Canada and gets whipped up into a hard-driving, swiftly-accumulating, thick, wet snow. The worst kind.

And *that* was exactly what I was looking at through the stained glass window. It was a virtual whiteout.

I stood up, looked into the library, through the windows, in the direction of the bay. Nothing was visible beyond the windows, just a world of white. A white blur.

“Gosh, Jake, where did all this come from? It was just raining.”

"Been snowing here for an hour, Herbie; three inches an hour the forecasters say, a major nor'easter. You sit tight and stay with Miss Collier. I'll be back there as quick as I can."

Miss Collier set two mugs down on her late aunt's writing table and looked at me. I have to admit, I was mesmerized by the storm outside and, frankly, worried about Jake's driving out in it. I'd finished my homework, done all the books in the science section, and figured I'd start unloading a few more shelves.

"It's really been so nice of you to help out," she told me. "What would you say if I told you I was thinking of nominating you as Student of the Month?"

"That'd be . . ." I found myself swallowing, wishing she really wouldn't, "nice of you, Miss Collier."

"You certainly do deserve it." She pulled up her aunt's chair, indicated with a nod for me to have a seat, then went to watch the storm, cradling her mug in two hands. She'd changed her clothes, was wearing a pair of those leggings-things, a dark, pullover sweater. I'd never seen her in pants before. "And do you know, I've been thinking, Herbie, that perhaps I was too rash in giving away my aunt's

little pocket calendar. I don't know if there's anything in it of a personal nature, but I would really like to have it back, that is, unless you threw it away."

Why did that come up? And why did I find myself lying?

"I'm sorry, Miss Collier, I did throw it away."

"I thought I saw you reading it today in study hall."

"Reading? Oh no, I was going to use it, but it had those flowers on it. . . ." Meanwhile I was thinking, my pocket, it's still in my pocket. But why does she want it? Had she overheard my conversation with Jake just a few minutes ago? That crackling sound I'd heard—had it been her, picking up another phone in the house? Or setting one down? Would she try to protect her brother? Avoid a scandal?

Because she is a teacher, after all, and the scandal, any scandal, would really hurt her.

"I wish I did have it, Miss Collier, I really wish I did."

She turned and walked over to me, looking down at me like she did at some of the kids in study hall who just sat there with nothing to do but goof around and cause trouble.

"They don't empty those wastebaskets at school like they should. Do you think it might still be there? In the wastebasket in the cafeteria?"

I shrugged, felt cold, uneasy, and even a little frightened.

"Most likely," I muttered, feeling funny suddenly. Just a little dizzy. The entire room lurched suddenly, but that was probably just emotion. I was frightened for a moment, wondering if I could have been wrong, if maybe she *and* her brother had been in on this together?

Well, why not?

I forced myself to sit up straight, said, "I think I'll just sit and stamp some books a while. I feel a little . . . a little tired."

"Why don't you do that, Herbie?" she said with a gentle grin, then walked away from me across the room.

There were still books on the table, this marked-up table that had been Esther Hadrinham's place to read and write and watch the water beyond. Except that when I looked out at the water now I saw nothing but a sheet of blinding white. And it made me feel queasy to look at it; I needed to look at close objects, small objects. There was a small pile of books on the table, including *Alice in Wonderland*, the book I'd refused from Miss Collier and Mrs. Rollins yesterday. For a moment I just looked at it; it had an illustrated cover, must

have been pretty old. Maybe I should have taken it. No, just a little kid's book.

But we all make mistakes, don't we? Even I do. Me. So cocky, so sure of myself, thinking I had everything figured out. Not everything, not nearly everything, because you can't imagine the shock I got when I opened the cover of that book and read:

"For my darling Belle, from Aunt Esther, November 3, 1949."

I was still a little dizzy. I quickly took another sip of cocoa as Miss Collier looked over at me and smiled.

Belle? Another "B"? Miss Collier? It didn't fit, not so well as Bernard Collier had.

And then the truth came to me . . . just a little bit too late.

"I'm going to write about Salvage Hill, about the pirate ships and the chest of pearls Ezra Hadrinham buried on the island. There are so many great stories here, so many wonderful tales. I'm going to sit up in Aunt Esther's favorite chair and write them all down."

I was barely aware of her voice, barely aware that I was cold and my face was wet. Where was I? *Where were we?* I threw a hand out and fell against something cold and wet and hard.

The great wraparound porch, that's where we were, and somehow I had my winter jacket on. My face stung, just a little; it was more like a numb feeling, like having novocaine before having a tooth filled.

"Waiting was the hardest part," she went on. Was she helping me? I could feel her voice near to my ear; her arms were under mine, pulling me up. "Did you know Esther's mother lived to be a hundred and five? Now, how could I wait another twenty or thirty years? No, I'd been so patient, so very patient, but when she told me she was rewriting her will and leaving Salvage Hill to the hospice, I knew I couldn't wait any longer."

She *was* half-supporting me; I must have been sick, and I was so dizzy I could barely walk. We must have been making our way to the garage, to her car.

But no! No! a part of my brain shouted. You've got it all wrong! And for a moment you had it right!

We were outside, yes, but starting down the steps of the porch . . . toward the bay. She was supporting and *leading* me, toward the bay. Snow was flying crazily around us, and though I felt sick and dizzy and confused, I knew we were going toward water.

"Belle," I whispered as it all came back, colliding inside my head. "You . . . you're Belle . . . you're 'B.'"

"I must remember to destroy that book and find that calendar, because I know you do have it, don't you? Is it in your schoolbag? Or is it—"

We were standing on the bottom step of the porch. Before us was the great sloping lawn, Esther Hadrinham's garden, the seawall, the jetties, the boat mooring, except now in this blinding haze of snow I could see nothing. . . .

Though I did feel her reaching into my pocket. That's when I managed to push her away and slipped and fell, rolling a half-dozen feet across the snow-covered lawn. My head hurt, I had no feeling in my hands or feet, and when I tried to stand, I couldn't.

Then she was there again, lifting me up, setting me onto my feet, half-dragging me toward the seawall.

"Little boys explore, don't they?" I heard her muttering in my ear. "They explore and go out into storms when they shouldn't. And me? Oh, I got so frantic, which will explain the footprints, won't it? Except the snow will probably fill them in this wind. . . ."

She was going to push me into the water. Another accidental death?

I was sick, nauseated, dizzy, and I knew once I hit the water in this jacket, in this condition, I was going to go right under, and even though I could swim, the cold would kill me. As it was, I was like a limp rag doll, being dragged along by her.

We were on the dock, I could feel its hardness under my feet, its slipperiness. I reached for the railing, held on, but she went on; physically I was no match for her, not like this.

And she was muttering, not so much to me, probably, as to herself. "Salvage Hill will be mine. I'll buy them out. Be rid of them. I've been published once, I can do it again. No more grading papers, no more snotty-nosed brats. I've waited too long for this. Too long."

Down the dock ramp to the raft we went. I tried again to grab onto the rail; she ripped my hands away as if I were a baby, a child. She really was going to kill me.

"Jake . . . Jake knows," I whispered.

"I heard what you told Jake. But if they never find the calendar, they'll never have any evidence against me. And if they decide to investigate Bernard, what's that to me?" She let go of me, perhaps knowing there was nowhere for me to go . . . except into the bay. But I couldn't stand. I slumped down

to my knees on the raft. It was rising and falling, taking my stomach with it each time. All around us was the constant slap of water. Suddenly I wanted just one thing, to put my head down and go to sleep.

"It wasn't meant to be that way, you know," she said as she crouched near me. "I really was coming to kill the wasps for her. She phoned that Saturday, said she'd seen bees going in and out of the seawall, but the Soapers were away so could I . . ." She paused; I could feel her hot breath on my face. "What could I do? It was perfect, like a grammatically perfect sentence. All I had to do was tell her the bees . . . the wasps . . . were dead, then come across the bay in a boat the next day and remove her bee-sting kit from her fanny pack while she napped. I had a key; it was all so easy. I knew I was taking a chance she might see the kit, but really, the reason it worked so well was that poor Aunt Esther was so forgetful."

But not that forgetful. And I remembered, even in the confused part of my brain that was struggling to stay awake, alert, and alive, that Jake had said it was *the niece* who had told him Esther Hadrinham was forgetful.

"I'm sorry about this," she said to me. "The roads are re-

ally bad. He'll get here too late, find me upset, searching for you, trying to rouse Bernard and interest Brenda. I'll have phoned the police by then, of course, but still it will be too late."

I felt her take hold of my arms, her grip steady and sure. I was too small, too weak, too sick; my efforts to fight her off were pitiful.

Then I heard a loud snap, the sound a sail makes when it's snapped back hard in a stiff wind, and I thought that was a strange sound to hear as the world turned dark and cold and wet.

A sail? But where? And oh; why in the world would anyone be sailing on a night like this?

The room was bright and warm, but stark, a hospital room. As I opened my eyes, I felt a face brush the side of my cheek; someone said my name: "Herbie, Herbie, I'm so proud of you."

It couldn't have been Mom, but it was. With no lecture, and no tears, though when I saw her eyes I could see they were wet. She'd been crying earlier.

"Hi, Mom. Boy, did I make a big mistake."

"No, Herbie," Jake said, coming around to the other side of the bed. "I did. And Elmer Hornton, he's taking the blame

on himself, too, says he never should have left you. He's in the hall looking like he just swallowed a stone."

"I heard a sail snap, but it was a gunshot, wasn't it?" I asked Jake. "You shot her, didn't you, Jake? Is she dead?"

Jake didn't move, he didn't nod, but his eyes said yes to both questions.

"But how did you know? How could you see her?" And then I smiled, recalling another of Miss Andrews' fact-filled lectures, this one on color and light. "You had an infrared scope, didn't you? You must have come out on a boat, across the bay? Harbor Police? Coast Guard? Hey, can I see the gun you used? I mean . . . later." I stopped short, aware that my mother was starting to cry again.

But I knew; I understood. Just as I had known, thought too late, that "B" was for Belle, the same Belle who had visited in late February, late April, school vacations both, and also had come to stay the last week of June, after school let out.

Jake had figured it out, too, and, as I learned later, tried to phone Salvage Hill but got no response. So he had come across the bay in a Coast Guard cruiser, seen us struggling on the raft, and shot the woman who had just pushed me into

the water, the same woman who had set her aunt up, Esther Hadrinham, to be stung to death by yellow jackets.

I would also later meet the two young men who had dived into the water and fished me out, heavy jacket and all.

"Can I come in? Damn, I've got to see this boy!" That was Mr. Hornton, finally rushing in, Mrs. Rollins at his side. His eyes were wet, too, as he leaned over me, grabbing and hugging

me like I was about to die right then and there. "Damn it, Herbie Sawyer, don't you go scaring me like this again!" He pulled away, looked down at me, then hugged me all over again. "Damn it, damn it, damn it, don't you know I love you like a grandson?"

I put my arms around him, too, and with my head against his shoulder, said, "I know it, Mr. Hornton, I know it real well."

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UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the May issue.*

The woman's voice was hysterical. "Police? She's been murdered!"

"Calm down, now," said Inspector Hector. "Who's been murdered? And where are you calling from?"

"Lavinia Van Hoppel. She was shot in her mansion out on Long Island. Oh, please come quickly. It's—it's horrible, poor Lavinia lying there—"

"I know the place," interrupted the inspector. "I'll be there within the hour—barring traffic jams. Stay there, ma'am, and don't move the body."

Getting out of his squad car, Inspector Hector noted six cars parked in the broad circular driveway in front of the mansion: an Acura Legend, a Buick Electra, a Ford Fairlane, a Cadillac Fleetwood, a BMW, and a Dodge Caravan. Some had New York plates, some New Jersey.

He rang the bell. The maid opened the door promptly. She had a frilly little apron tied around her slender waist and a stiffly starched white cap atop her raven-black hair. She had been weeping, but she curtsied from force of habit.

"This way, sir," she said. "The guests are waiting in the drawing room." Dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex, she led the way.

By way of introduction, the maid said, "We three women are Alicia, Bernice, and Cynthia, and the three gentlemen are Daniel, Edward, and Frank." Presumably the young woman was too distraught to remember last names.

She then guided him into her mistress's bedroom. Miss Van Hoppel was indeed dead. Her body lay crumpled on the floor; bloodstains had ruined her expensive gown and trickled onto the Persian carpet. The inspector would examine the scene more thoroughly later. At present, he wanted to question the occupants of the mansion as soon as possible. They returned to the drawing room.

"You'd better stay," Hector ordered the maid. "I may have some questions for you later." He turned to the guests and said sternly, "I want honest answers; I'll check all statements made. What are

the circumstances of this gathering? Do you know anyone present who had a motive for killing Miss Van Hoppel? Okay? . . . I'll start with you, Edward."

(1) Edward replied, "I arrived just after the lady in the Cadillac. Then an old friend of mine, Miss Gravell, arrived and confided that Lavinia had invited her ex-husband. That was a shocker! They had fought frequently before the divorce, and he once threatened her life. Another with motive might be the fiancé of her cousin. You see, the cousin stands to inherit the Van Hoppel fortune, and he might well have killed Lavinia, hoping to marry the cousin after she inherited millions. Anyhow, Miss Gravell and I strolled up to the door and were admitted by the maid."

(2) Alicia then spoke up nervously: "Miss Van Hoppel planned a dinner party and sent out invitations ten days ago. The three gentlemen who came include Mr. Jackson, the man from Oceanside, and the owner of the Dodge Caravan. As for motive—well, others present may have had reason to hate Lavinia, but one might suggest the manager of her financial affairs. There have been rumors of certain—ah—"irregularities."

(3) Bernice was next. "Alicia, the man from Monmouth, and the owner of the Acura have the last names of Gravell, Halstead, and Ingram. As for motive, Lavinia once told me that some valuable family heirlooms had mysteriously disappeared, and that she was considering charging the maid with theft." Bernice added, "One of the guests lives in Queens."

By that time the atmosphere in the drawing room was electrically charged with hate and suspicion. Everyone plainly distrusted everyone else.

(4) Daniel reluctantly took his turn: "I guess I was the last to arrive. I parked my car beside the BMW. We are all (including the maid) from different towns. Edward, Krantz, and the owner of the Ford Fairlane come from Newark, Poughkeepsie, and Rensselaer. I might be so bold as to suggest that Lavinia's old classmate might have shot her in a fit of jealousy. She always resented Lavinia's wealth and success."

(5) Frank looked at the others, then declared: "Bernice, Lamont, and the guest from Rensselaer own the BMW, the Cadillac, and the Buick parked outside. I can't think of anyone present with a better motive than her ex-husband. Lavinia dumped him—cut him

off without a penny—and took back her maiden name. Now that parasitic gigolo will have to earn his living, just like the rest of us.”

(6) Cynthia was the last to make a statement. Her lower lip trembled, and she appeared on the verge of breaking into sobs. Her nervousness was exacerbated by the angry glances cast in her direction by the other suspects.

Finally she spoke, hesitantly. “It—it just isn’t true!”

“What isn’t true?” inquired the inspector kindly. The last thing he wanted was for the young woman to become hysterical.

“One of them,” she waved a hand in the general direction of the others, “s-s-suggested I had a reason to kill Lavinia. I didn’t—you must believe me. But since everyone is accusing someone else of having a motive, I suppose Lavinia’s cousin, who is in line to inherit her millions, had a *very* strong motive.”

“Do you know who killed Miss Van Hoppel?” asked Hector.

Her answer surprised him. “Yes, sir. W-we *all* know. Frankly, inspector, I was shocked that the other four didn’t come right out and say who it was. Maybe they were also glad to have her dead—a kind of conspiracy. Well, I’m now s-s-scared of them all . . .” her voice trailed off.

“Then, please, just report what happened. And take your time.”

Cynthia pulled herself together and declared, “Five of us had gathered in the dining room. The person from Newark said, ‘Not like Lavinia to be late for anything,’ and Halstead agreed. The one who arrived in the Buick Electra then declared, ‘Frank, perhaps we should go find out what’s delaying her.’ That’s when we heard the shot.

“We five rushed in, and there she lay, dead. Naturally we were in a state of shock. ‘Omgod!’ Halstead exclaimed. ‘What will we do?’ asked the person from Newark. At last I calmed my nerves enough to volunteer to phone you.

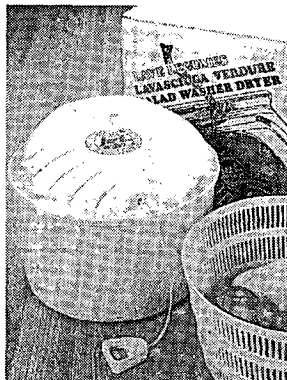
“Nobody saw any strangers around the estate grounds. Only the six of us were in the mansion. The murderer had to be the only one of us who was *not* in the dining room when the shot was fired.”

“I’m grateful you acted promptly before the killer could flee the scene,” said Inspector Hector. “You have just provided me with the last piece of vital information. I now know who shot Lavinia Van Hoppel and why.”

Who shot the millionairess? What was the motive?

See page 149 for the solution to the March puzzle.

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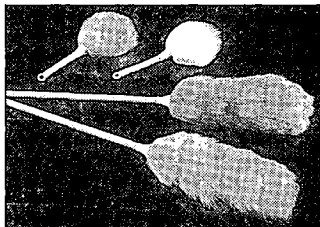


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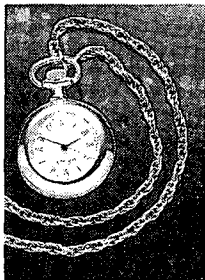
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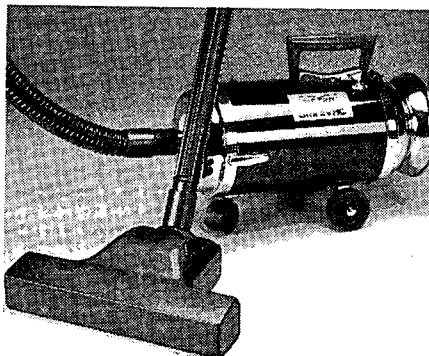
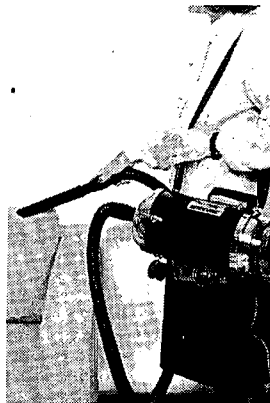
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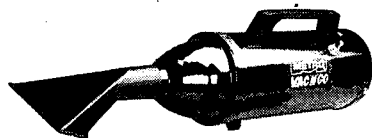
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FICTION

Child's Play

John L. French

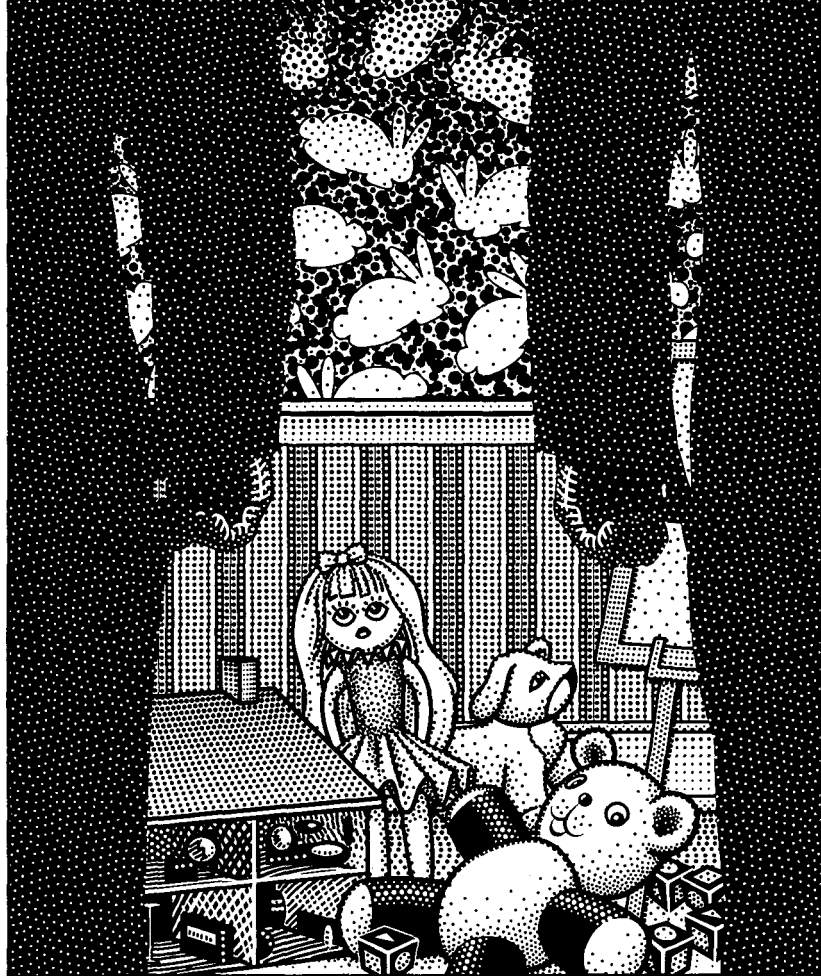


Illustration by Steve Chalker

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Murder scenes are noisy. There is the crackle and static of police radios, all tuned to different channels, all turned up so their users can hear their own. There is the professional conversation among patrol officers, detectives, and technicians, discussing procedures, motives, and evidence. There is the unprofessional chatter, the small talk about the job, the wife, the ballgame. If the victim was unlucky enough to die in an undignified or embarrassing manner, there are the tasteless jokes at his expense, unfunny anywhere else, nervous laughter keeping the grimness of death at bay. If the death occurred outdoors, add in the noise of the traffic and of the crowd. Murder scenes are always noisy.

Except when a cop dies.

When a cop is killed, the scene becomes a church. Radios are turned down, and people talk in whispers. There is no small talk, and nothing is funny. The crowd is cautious, aware of the officers' mood, afraid of the anger waiting to be expressed.

I got to the scene shortly after Detective Alexander Klein. Leaving my equipment in the van, I walked up to the house to review the scene. As I went in, the cop at the door

said, "Careful," and nodded at the floor near the stairs. There were drops of blood making a trail down the steps and into the dining room. I sidestepped the blood and went over to Klein, who was still getting the basic details from the primary officer, the first on the scene.

"She's up on the second floor, detective. You want to see her now?"

Klein noticed me as the officer was asking his question. He nodded hello, and I copied information out of his notebook as he answered, "No, we'll start at the back and work our way up."

Except for an officer at the front door and one at the back gate, we three were alone. All the other responding officers and detectives were outside. Some were canvassing the neighborhood, looking for evidence, talking to neighbors, hoping for a witness. Those not working were waiting. They were waiting for us to perform a miracle, to work magic and pull a name from what we found. With the name would come a focus for their anger, someone to pursue, someone they hoped would resist.

The house in which Clair Douglas was killed was a row house on Dundalk Avenue in southeast Baltimore City. Behind the block of houses was a

large, undeveloped lot, separated from the back yards by an alley. As we walked from the kitchen into the back yard, I looked at the paved alley. No tiretracks there; maybe in the lot. Officer David Campbell began his tour.

"The phone cord's been cut." He pointed to a wire running down the back of the house. "And as you probably saw, the back door's been kicked in."

I took a closer look at the door. As the crime laboratory technician assigned to this scene, the gathering of evidence was my responsibility. I could see faint shoemarks on the lock stile and center rail. In what was left of the locks I could see no signs of forced entry, no prymarks or pick scratches. The deadbolt had held. The screws holding it had not.

Except for the back door, nothing on the first floor appeared to have been disturbed. The door from the kitchen to the basement was open. Campbell explained, "The basement door was open when we got here. We checked down there, didn't find anything."

Klein and I nodded. We would both check later.

We went upstairs, careful to avoid the blood drops on the steps. The house had three bedrooms, all on the second floor.

The master bedroom was in front; two smaller bedrooms were in the rear. Campbell indicated the right rear room. As we approached, he pointed out three holes in the wall opposite the bedroom door and a bullet on the floor beneath them. I would have to dig the others out later. There were heavier drops of blood on the floor there and at the entrance to the room.

Clair Douglas was lying face-down on the bedroom floor. Her head was pointing toward us as we stood in the doorway, her legs collapsed beneath her. Near her right hand was a BPD-issued 9mm, a cartridge case jammed in the chamber. To her right and behind her were several cartridge cases. There were more holes in the rear wall.

It occurred to Klein before it did to me. "Where's the kid?" he asked. As he did, I noticed the room for the first time as a room and not as a crime scene. The wallpaper was rabbits, no, bunnies and ducks in blue and yellow. The bed was too small for an adult. The base of a lamp was another duck, and stuffed animals, blocks, games, and toys were everywhere. A blackboard stood in the near corner, a dollhouse in the far right. There was a cartridge case on its dining room floor.

"One of the guys outside used to work with Douglas," answered Campbell. "He said she's divorced. Her ex has a real job, and he and his new wife have custody. Douglas only sees the girl on her week-ends off."

"Anybody been notified?" asked Klein.

"Not yet. We made a quick search for an address book or phone numbers. Didn't find anything, but we didn't want to tear things apart until you guys got done."

Tired of looking everywhere but at the body, we moved into the hallway. Klein turned to me. "Matthew, the usual good job. Pictures, prints, anything else you can think of. Hell, everything else you can think of. You gonna need any help?"

"I think I'd rather do this one alone." Like him, I got better results working by myself. It takes longer, but it gets results.

"Then I'll get out of your way and talk to the brass."

"Try to keep them outside."

"They'll stay out. I'll have a 'biohazard' tape strung across the front door. They won't want to come near it."

Klein left to brief the command staff who had gathered. He would then talk to whatever witnesses the uniformed officers had found. I took another

look around the house, got my equipment, and went to work.

I photographed everything, taking overall shots of the rooms and the front and back of the house as well as closeups of the evidence. I drew a diagram showing the position of the evidence and of Douglas. Any surface that might have been touched by the killer was dusted for prints. I had cut out the bloodstained pieces of carpet and was packaging the cartridge cases when the M.E. arrived. While the doctor was making her examination, I took the back door off its hinges and collected the severed phone cord. After the body had been removed, I was free to cut the bullets out of the wall. Finally I was done. When I left, only the officers protecting the scene were still there. Some of the neighbors were still standing on their porches, watching and wondering what was happening to their city.

It was late when I got back to headquarters. The people in the analytical units, the ones who worked "normal" hours, were getting ready to go home for the day. They stayed. The latent print examiners started sorting through the lifts I had recovered from the scene, entering the good ones into the ID-FAST computer. Firearms experts began examining the

cartridge cases and bullets, and the Trace Evidence Unit started work on the blood evidence. Whatever their previous plans had been for that evening, no one was in a hurry to leave.

I finished my report and everything else I had to do and went home. It was late and I was tired, so sleep came easy, despite the day's activities. The next morning I picked up the results of everyone's hard work and got to the homicide unit just in time for the initial crime scene review and progress report.

Sergeant Joshua Parker was in charge. He was Klein's immediate supervisor. He had been on yesterday's scene just long enough to get the needed information and to determine that Klein had everything under control. He had spent the rest of the day coordinating activities outside the house. He'd just started the meeting when I came in.

"So nice of you to join us, Mr. Grace," he said politely, letting just enough sarcasm through.

"Sorry, deacon, church ran late."

Parker was an elder at a small church in the Park Circle area. That's how he got his nickname. That and the fact that he has never been known to tell a lie, to a co-worker, a

suspect, or, most surprisingly, a superior. He pretended to ignore my remark and turned to Klein.

"Detective Klein, would you please start again for the benefit of the latecomers?"

"Yes, sir." Klein repressed a smile before he continued. He knew as well as I did that Parker hated his nickname, and that only a civilian like myself could get away with using it to his face.

"Southeast got the call at 0905 yesterday morning. A neighbor walking her dog noticed the open back door. Campbell here was the first on the scene, and he found the body."

Klein paused. It was a little easier here, at headquarters, a day later, but it was still a cop who had died. That made it personal, and difficult to treat it as just another case. It reminded us how routine and business-like violent death had become.

"According to the M.E.," Klein continued, "death occurred early yesterday morning, sometime after one A.M. Cause was a single gunshot wound in the heart. She was struck twice more; neither would have been fatal."

"Where else was she hit?" asked another detective.

"Left shoulder and arm, both through and through. I think

Matthew dug the shots out of the wall." I nodded a yes. "The heart shot stayed in. I got it from the M.E. at the autopsy."

He took a small plastic bag out of his pocket and laid it on the table. The bullet inside it was a .38, the same kind of bullet some of the people looking at it still used in their guns, the kind most drug dealers have stopped using.

"Department issue?" someone asked, less a joke than a worried idea we all had. All cops are brothers and sisters, but not all families get along.

"Don't know. We'll find out once I submit it to Firearms." Klein put the bullet away.

"Describe the scene, please." Parker clearly wanted to move away from uncomfortable speculation, but there was a scowl on his face that told me we would be coming back to this subject.

Campbell started off, with Klein filling in details as he went. I passed copies of the crime scene photographs and diagrams around as they talked. There were the usual questions that we answered as best we could.

As he concluded, Klein asked, "Matthew, any results from all your hard work?"

They all waited for the magic words. I didn't have any and told them so. "Nothing from the

computer. Most of the prints were Douglas's, but there were a few unidentified suitables, mainly from the back door, handrail, and bedroom door frame. Mostly palm prints. Give us a name, and we'll match them."

"You hope!" This from Rich Arnold, the newest addition to the ever-growing homicide unit. His fascination with the forensic sciences had rapidly turned to disappointment when he learned how little they help to solve murders. His role in this investigation was to watch and learn, and to run the errands and do the detail work that Klein didn't have the time or inclination to do.

"What else've you got from the Negative Results Unit?"

I let his remark pass. I would remind him of it one day when a witness folded and all he had left was a fingerprint to put his suspect on the scene.

"The cartridge cases in the bedroom were all from Douglas's gun. So were the bullets from the hallway floor and wall. All standard issue. No blood on any of them. I got four bullets from the wall behind her. Alexander's makes five. Of the four, I've got two that can't be matched to any particular gun and two that can be matched if you find the right gun. All came from a .38."

Parker leaned forward to interrupt, and I anticipated him. "Nothing from the open case file either, sarge." He leaned back again, and I continued, "Shoeprints from the back door, cutmarks from the phone cord, it's the same story. Get us the work boots and cutters that made them, and we'll match them up for you."

I slid the technical information, style of shoe, type of cutter, and so forth, over to Klein.

"Finally, there was enough blood in the hallway for analysis. Trace came up with A-positive blood and a string of genetic markers. Douglas is O-positive. Trace has sent a sample off for DNA work as well."

Parker seemed satisfied that nothing had been missed. What pleased Klein and him the most, and what Arnold had missed, was that there was evidence that could not be explained away by the killer.

"What about the husband?" Parker asked.

"Ex-husband," Klein reminded him. "I questioned him about five yesterday afternoon. He called us when he heard the news on the radio. He had been on the road all day."

"What's he do?" asked Campbell.

"Sales rep, repairs for a local business machine company."

"You have a paraffin test done?" Campbell was a thirty-year man looking to make it forty. When he started, hot wax was used to collect gunshot residue samples from a suspect's hands. Today we use an adhesive and look at it under an electron microscope. It is much more efficient but not as much fun.

"GSR," I corrected. "I took the samples about six o'clock yesterday. Trace is running them now, but don't expect anything. They were collected more than twelve hours after the shooting, he'd probably washed his hands a dozen times, and he probably didn't do it."

"What about it, Klein? Does Mr. Douglas look good as a suspect?"

"Actually, sergeant, his name is Jack Bracken. Douglas went back to her maiden name when they split.

"He's a suspect, of course, just because he's the ex. He says he was home in bed that night, and his wife backs him up. She would, of course. But there's no motive that we knew of, and he hasn't been shot."

"You've made sure of that?"

"Well, I asked him when I picked him up at his house if he'd be willing to be examined by a doctor, and he went one better. He stripped down right

in his living room. No extra holes in him."

I chimed in. "What about his wife? Could she be the shooter?"

"Again, no motive. Jealousy, maybe, if she thought Bracken and Douglas were getting friendly again. But it's not likely. Besides, no bullet wounds."

He paused for effect, watching our faces. Before any of us could ask, he continued, "No, I didn't. Not that it wouldn't have been more enjoyable than examining Bracken, and she did offer, with her husband present, but I had a female officer and a nurse examine her at St. Lucy's. No wounds."

"Just to be sure, ask them for their prints."

"Already taken, sergeant. Matthew—"

"Latents checked this morning. No matches."

"Who else looks good?"

"Nobody looks really good, sarge. Clair did a year in internal investigations. Rich, what did you find out from IID?"

"I checked with Lieutenant Tomin. He doesn't recall that Douglas handled any major complaints, just routine brutality beefs. Nobody lost serious time or got fired on any of them. He's going to check. Say, listen—"

Arnold had something to add. He had been fidgeting in his seat ever since he'd looked at the crime scene photographs. Parker cut him off.

"I checked with upstairs. Officer Douglas had not filed any harassment complaints, or any other complaints, against anyone in the department, so that rules that out. Klein, you and Arnold will have to check at her district. Let's pray that this one isn't in the family."

"Amen," a few of us, including me, answered, none of us mockingly. In the pause Arnold started to tell us his idea, but again his timing was off and Parker continued.

"Who else have we got?"

Klein turned to Campbell, who referred to his notes before reporting. "We checked the whole neighborhood. Nobody heard or saw anything that could help. A few heard what they thought might have been shots, about one thirty, but either couldn't place them or didn't care enough to call them in. The house to the left of Douglas is vacant, waiting for renters. To the right live a couple in their eighties, old eighties. They wouldn't have heard shots in their bedroom, much less next door.

"Of the people we talked to, nobody can remember any trouble Douglas had with any-

one. Nobody said anything bad about her, either.

"My sergeant is back at the Southeast now. He and the property crime guys are going over the files. By the end of the day you'll have a list of the local burglars and trouble-makers."

Klein had by now noticed Arnold's attempts to interrupt. It was like Alexander not to give him a chance. New guys got treated like that. As Campbell finished, Klein started up before Arnold could.

"There are only three people we've found so far who might have wanted Clair Douglas dead, and been able to follow through. Andrea Johnson is first. Johnson started holding drugs for a Pennsylvania Avenue dealer. He got killed, and she inherited the business. Douglas kept busting her, she kept getting out. Now it's personal, especially since Johnson filed a brutality complaint after each arrest. Her next trial is in two weeks, and she was looking at a long stay. Douglas is, was the only witness. Johnson will walk, again.

"Next up is Anthony Lee. Five years ago he tried to hold up a Korean grocer in the East-ern. Douglas walked in and shot him before he could shoot her. He just got out and might have wanted a payback.

"The last is 'in family.'"

Some of us had only been half listening. Klein's last statement had all our attention. Even Arnold stopped fidgeting.

"Sarge, you were probably right when you said that Douglas hadn't filed any harassment complaints. But she did witness something between an academy instructor and a cadet when she was last up there for in-service training. Apparently the instructor put his hands where he shouldn't have. The cadet talked to Clair, who told her to file a complaint. She was going to do it today. Without Clair, it's his word against hers. With Clair, his career was over and so, I imagine, were his pension and his marriage."

"How did you learn about this?" asked Parker, who clearly had not liked Klein's "probably" remark.

"The cadet called me this morning when she heard the news. The instructor's name is Kevin Reynolds. And, yes, he has a history. Two shootings, one of them questionable, in three years got him off the streets and into Education and Training."

"Any results?"

"Matthew would tell you that Latent Prints is checking their prints right now. Oddly enough, all three are A-positive. We'll need a court order

for any further bloodwork. If there's a print match, we'll go ahead. If not, we keep looking—at them and anyone else we can find.”

One of the other detectives sitting in on the review asked, “What about Reynolds? Can't he be ordered to submit to a blood test? He's with the department.”

“He's also a murder suspect,” Parker countered. “We can't treat him any differently. If he is the one, and we force him to do anything, some judge might say we violated his rights and we'll lose the case. What is it, Detective Arnold?”

Surprised at suddenly being given the floor, Arnold stammered at first, trying to get all his words out at once. Finally, conscious that, except for the Crime Lab, everyone looking at him, waiting for him, was a superior, he calmed down, took a deep breath, and made his big play.

“Well, let's look at what probably happened.” He stopped, expecting a rebuke, a remark, someone to tell him to shut up. None of us did. We would have reviewed that anyway; now was a good time.

“Go on, Detective Arnold,” Parker encouraged him.

“Okay, Douglas was either awake, or she woke up when her killer kicked the door in.

Either way she knew someone was coming in. Maybe she tried to call 911 but the phone was out. She gets her gun out of the nightstand or from someplace. Grace, you found the holster on her bed, right?” I nodded, and he went on.

“She went into her kid's room. Why? There were other places upstairs better suited for an ambush. I would have lain at the top of the stairs and shot as he came up. There's only one reason she went into that room.”

He paused. He was Ellery Queen and we were the readers. He wanted us to guess. Actually, he wanted us to guess and be wrong. Then he would show us up. None of us spoke, and after waiting a beat too long for effect, he let us in on his discovery.

“Look at this—” he picked through the crime scene photographs and selected two “—and this.” He showed them around. One was an overall of the room, showing the toys. The next one was taken out of the bedroom window looking down on the alley.

I knew what he was going to say. I wanted him to say it, was waiting for him to say it, especially after his “negative results” crack.

“She knew who it was who'd broken in. Maybe she recog-

nized the car, but somehow she knew.

"Look at the room, a blackboard, magnetic letters, spelling blocks. She went into her daughter's room to leave us a dying clue in case the killer got her."

The laughter that followed was not a loud, mocking laughter, but rather the low chuckling of veterans at a common rookie mistake. Arnold reddened, at first not understanding. When he caught on, it was too late to pretend that he'd been joking. Not that we would have believed him.

Parker, who had not been amused, said sternly, "Detective Arnold, when you were told to study investigative procedures, did you think that Christie and Allingham were on the reading list?"

Klein had not laughed either. It's considered bad form to laugh at your partner, however temporary and junior he might be, when others are present.

"Rich," he said consolingly, "that wasn't a bad idea. Not an especially good one, but you tried. It's more likely that Douglas went into the bedroom to see what was going on out back and got trapped in there. But if there was a dying clue, where is it? What was it?"

Arnold had no answer.

"Sorry about that, Rich," said one of the other detectives. He wasn't sorry, but it's something you have to say. "A lot of us forget we were new once, and a lot of new detectives forget that this isn't like TV.

"You know, even if Douglas had left a clue, the killer would have seen it first. He would have erased the blackboard or something like that. Nice try, though." This last was said with a barely disguised grin that didn't help Arnold at all.

After Arnold's first try at crimesolving, the discussion became one of possible lines of investigation and further leads. It wasn't long before we started repeating ourselves. Parker closed the meeting.

As we were leaving, Klein asked, "Matthew, an early lunch?"

"Beats fighting crime. Give me time to report to my director, and I'll meet you out on Frederick Street. A half hour."

We ate at Nicky's, one of the many small restaurants and carry-outs around the HQ building that depended on hungry cops to keep them in business. Klein had his usual burger, fries, and soda. I ate a baked potato with something that might have been cheese poured over it. We talked as we ate, about a dozen things unrelated to police work. Gradually,

though, we worked our way back to the murder.

"Matthew, what would you have done if you had been Douglas?"

"Jumped out a window. I don't have a gun."

"You would have if you had been Douglas. Would you have gone into a back room?"

"Maybe, if I heard the door breaking and wanted to know who it was. The alley light is just outside her house. A car parked there could have been seen. If the killing were personal, she might have recognized the car."

"Johnson's she would have, she'd impounded it enough. I don't know if she would have recognized anyone else's car. But Rich had a point. Why did she go into her daughter's room?"

"Why not? She had to go somewhere. Maybe she figured that if the killer went into the front bedroom she'd have a better chance coming out the back. We'll never know."

"If she had been threatened, she might not have taken it seriously enough to report it, but she might have taken precautions."

"Like learning what car the guy, or gal, drove, in case someone started following her."

We ate in silence for awhile. Toward the end of our meal,

Klein asked, "What if Rich was right?"

"It would be a first."

"No, I'm serious. Just because the idea sounds like it came out of a British manor house doesn't mean we shouldn't pursue it. Not everything is Chandler and McBain."

"Alexander, what are you suggesting?"

"We go back and look."

"Alex, you are a very good detective. I am a very good crime scene man. We are both trained observers. If there had been a 'dying clue,' one of us would have seen it. And Danny was right. If it was out where we could see it, and Douglas didn't have time to be clever, the killer would have found it and removed it, or erased it."

"Maybe we didn't see it because we weren't looking for it. We're going back."

"Okay, but don't tell Arnold."

An hour after lunch, Klein and I were standing in the room where Clair Douglas had been killed. We were looking at her daughter's toys, trying to transmute them into oracles. The blackboard had been wiped clean, as had the crayon board on its reverse side. Fingerprint powder on the crayon board failed to reveal any residual message. The letter blocks were arranged in their tray,

none missing, no words spelled out. A metal board that looked like a child's school slate held several ragged rows of magnetic plastic letters, in no particular order, again not spelling any words.

Klein spent several minutes contemplating the possible meaning of the cartridge case I had previously found in the dollhouse. When he asked me if I thought a rubber snake on a shelf could be an eel, which is "Lee" spelled backwards, I told him it was time to go. There was no hidden message, no final clue. Reluctantly, he agreed.

While I was packing my kit, Klein took a last look around. Later, the house would be turned over to Douglas's parents, so this was his last look. I picked up my bag as Klein asked, "Matthew, how many letters in the alphabet?"

"Twenty-six."

"How many on that magnetic board?"

I counted. "Thirty."

"How many vowels?"

"Eleven." Some were doubled or tripled.

"Which leaves how many?"

"Nineteen."

"There should be at least twenty-one. What's missing?"

I looked at the board, ran through the alphabet. I got as

far as *K*. It wasn't there. Neither was the *R*.

I said to Klein, "I don't know what's worse, that it was him or that Arnold was right."

The warrant on Reynolds' house was served while he was at the academy. He was detained and advised of his rights. The officers assigned to guard him made the mistake of treating him like a cop and not as an armed suspect. Before he could be stopped, Reynolds saved the state the cost of a trial.

I was on another scene when all that happened. Later I talked to Klein.

"We found the letters in his pocket when we searched the body."

"Why would he have kept them? It would have been easy enough to put them back on the board."

"He panicked, I guess, or he was in a hurry. He might not have expected a gun battle, and all those shots did make a lot of noise."

"What happens now?"

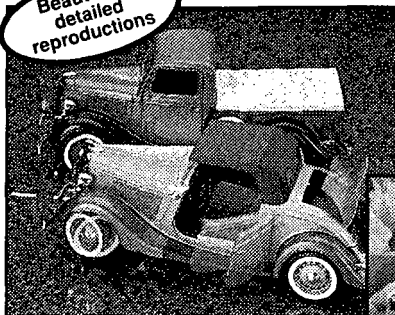
"The usual. The department issues a statement, you know, 'Tragic events, et cetera,' and everybody but us forgets about two dead cops. You and I finish lunch and wait for our next call."

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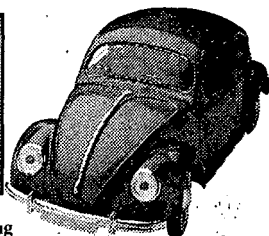
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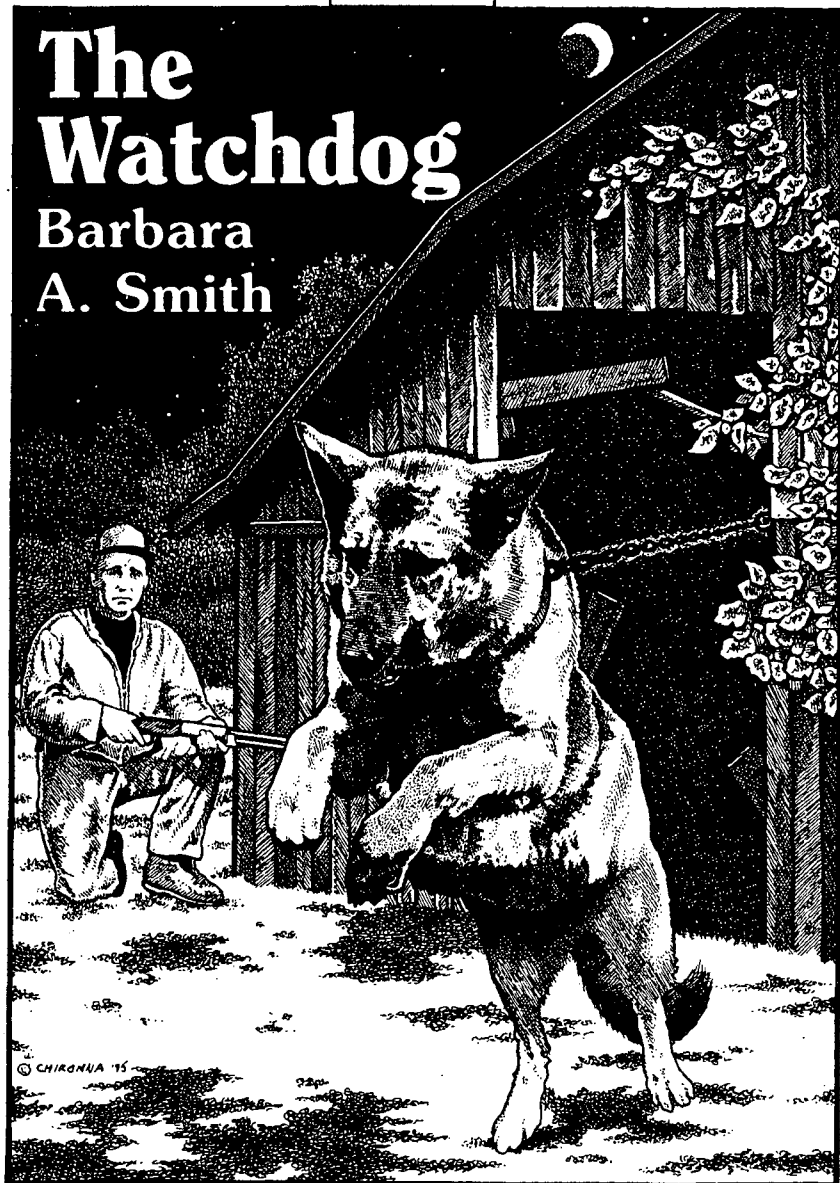
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FICTION

The Watchdog

Barbara
A. Smith



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They'd pulled the first victim from his cardboard residence beneath the Pudding River Bridge on June tenth. A transient.

Although no one knew him, the unfortunate hobo quickly became the hottest topic in town. Of course, a headless corpse was always news, especially in a rural community like Ivory Creek. But it wasn't until two weeks later when they found local farmer Joe Baker also sans a place to hang his hat that the townspeople started to panic.

"Ripped right off his shoulders," Art Kimlinger said from his place in line at Big Mike's Hardware Store, suddenly the busiest place in town.

"I heard chewed off," the next man in line offered.

Rusty Hannan grimaced and shook his head. He didn't like having to wait twenty minutes to pay for a gallon of kerosene. "It wasn't no animal."

"Oh, it weren't," Art said sarcastically. "And just what makes you the expert?"

Rusty shrugged. "I don't know of any animal that takes just the head off his prey. The newspaper said there were no marks anywhere else on the bodies."

"Rusty's right," Mike Bradford, owner of the store, said from behind the counter. "Prob-

ably one of those cults. Bunch of crazy sons of bitches up in the woods running around naked waving poor old Joe's head on a stick."

"They'll be in for one hell of a surprise if they show up at my place," Art said. He stepped up and dropped two deadbolts on the counter, then pointed at the ammo case. "Give me two boxes of those Winchester double aughts."

Rusty hoped for Art Kimlinger's sake that he was a good shot if the killer did show up at his house. The sixty-year-old farmer, more than a hundred pounds overweight, couldn't walk across the street without stopping to rest. But given a twelve gauge scattergun, he suddenly fancied himself invincible. Rusty knew better. It didn't matter what gun a man packed or how careful he was; when his number came up, he could kiss it goodbye. He'd learned that lesson in Vietnam.

"You ever put a telephone in at your place?" Art asked Rusty.

"Nope."

"Best get one. If this wacko shows up, you'll be wishing you had one."

Rusty didn't bother to answer. Did they really think some killer was going to hang around forty minutes while a county bull drove over from

Putnam to arrest him? He'd lived twenty years in his cabin without a phone, he didn't plan on getting one now. If a killer showed up in *his* woods, he had better know them as well as Rusty did.

"Better make that three boxes of shells," Art said.

Rusty chuckled. "How many of them killers you figure there are, Art?"

"Laugh all you want to. I've got a family to think about. Never hurts a man to be prepared."

Since Joe Baker's death, Big Mike's Hardware Store looked like the Putnam shopping mall on the day after Thanksgiving. Every handgun, shotgun, and rifle beneath the counter had sold within a week. Deadbolts, motion lights, personal alarms, pepper spray, even baseball bats, moved briskly. The waiting list for home alarm installations stretched past three weeks. All the citizens of Ivory Creek were preparing for the worst except Rusty Hannan, who'd been prepared for the last twenty years.

Ten-year-old Brendon Kraemer and his nine-year-old cousin Alice would remember this Fourth of July as long as they lived. It was only half a fib because they really were walking to the store for Popsicles. That

they intended to stop in a vacant field along the way and set off bottle rockets was the half they left out. The body they found in the grass, clothed in shorts and T-shirt with a Dodgers baseball cap resting between its bloody shoulders, was the part they'd always remember.

Victim number three, Willie Cooper, was the town idiot. While most thought he was retarded, Willie had actually been quite normal until he smashed his three-wheeler into a tree fifteen years earlier at the age of ten. Willie, or Mr. Baseball, as polite townsfolk addressed him, would talk to anyone who'd listen. Annoying, but harmless. And now, dead.

While Willie's death didn't come as a great personal loss to many, it did occur within spitting distance of the town, which concerned everyone. Even Rusty Hannan began to think there might be more to this than just a passing lunatic. Other than the missing heads, the bodies bore no marks or signs of a struggle, which meant they hadn't seen it coming.

Whack!

Ambush.

Once Rusty got a man in his sights, it only took one bullet. But he had to see him coming.

His cabin sat on ten acres of dense Douglas fir, a quarter mile off the main road. He'd built it himself after his discharge from the Marine Corps. Good therapy, the doctors said.

He needed an alarm system that was portable, covered a large area, and sounded an immediate warning. It had to be easy to operate and dependable. Since he didn't have any savings, and didn't qualify for credit, it also had to be inexpensive. He didn't like it, but the answer was obvious.

The closest animal shelter was fifty miles away in Putnam.

Rusty had owned one dog in his lifetime. His border collie, Taffy, died a week before his sixteenth birthday. They'd grown up together, inseparable, but as Rusty grew and matured, Taffy became old and feeble. Instead of all the good years they'd spent together, he mostly remembered her pathetic final days. He'd vowed he'd never own another pet.

But this would be a watchdog, nothing else.

He knew what he wanted before he arrived at the shelter. Low maintenance. Short hair and big enough to knock a man down.

A girl in her twenties, a skinny redhead splattered with

freckles, guided him through the kennels. A plastic dogbone-shaped name tag identified her as Annie. She asked lots of questions.

Their entrance to each run brought on a frenzy of barks, ranging from tiny yips to throaty woofs. He hadn't expected to see so many animals. The dogs rushed forward, standing or jumping against the gates, their pink tongues darting through the wire mesh to lick his hand in greeting. Some urinated on the cement in their excitement.

"Is your yard fenced?" Annie asked.

There was a fence along one side of his property. It belonged to a neighbor. "Sure," Rusty replied. "I got a fence."

"And what about shelter?"

"I plan to keep him in the garage at night." He meant the lean-to on the side of the toolshed.

She nodded. "You have thirty days to spay or neuter any animal. The adoption fee covers part of the surgery, plus a veterinary examination. Of course, you're responsible for the vaccinations."

A black Lab caught Rusty's eye. He wiggled a finger through the mesh and called to him, but the dog bowed his head and retreated to the back corner of the run.

"Timid," she said. "Probably been abused. How about this little guy. Dachshunds make great watchdogs."

Rusty grimaced. "I got possums on my place bigger than that. What about this one?"

A tan and black German shepherd approached the gate. He barked once, then settled on his haunches.

"Neutered male," she said. "Animal Control picked him up in the country, out in your direction as a matter of fact. No tags, no identification—hungry, sore feet. Someone probably dumped him."

"Why?" Rusty asked. "Is there something wrong with him?"

Annie smiled faintly and shook her head. She unlocked the gate and stepped inside with the shepherd. "There's nothing wrong with most of the animals in here. It's people who have the problem. He's a big dog, and it costs money to feed a big dog. And then there's the maintenance—brushing, picking up after him in the yard."

"I have ten acres," he said with a shrug.

"You're not planning to let the dog run loose, are you?"

Rusty began to wonder just who was doing who the favor here. "No, but I don't plan to keep him on a leash when I'm

out in the woods either. Besides, I got a fence."

Annie snapped a lead on the shepherd's collar and led him through the back door into a fenced exercise yard. Keeping a tight grip, she briskly trotted him around the perimeter before handing the leash to Rusty. "They're cooped up all day. Sometimes they act a little rambunctious at first. Unfortunately, we can't spend as much time working with the older, less adoptable animals."

Rusty walked the shepherd around the yard twice. A couple of tugs, plus a stern *no* corrected most undesired changes in course.

"Looks like he's been on a leash before," Annie hollered. "Probably wouldn't take much to train him."

"Down, boy," Rusty commanded, slapping the dog's rump. "Down."

The shepherd obediently settled to his stomach.

"Now stay!" Rusty dropped the leash and walked away, but the shepherd gave immediate pursuit.

He pointed at the ground and said sharply, "Stay, boy, stay!"

The dog barked repeatedly, springing from side to side in a frenzied game. He'd stop, crouch, his tail briskly fanning the air, then launch into another series of barks and leaps.

Each of Rusty's attempts to retrieve the leash met with the same behavior.

"He's probably just excited to be outside," Annie said.

When Rusty finally recovered the leash, he promptly walked the shepherd to the kennel.

"He's been here for five days. We're only required to hold strays for three, but when we have the space we keep them—just in case the owner shows up."

Rusty handed the leash to Annie.

"They usually don't, though," she said.

He nodded.

"I've got a Doberman-Lab mix that just came in this morning. You want to take a look?"

Rusty watched the shepherd, who now stood calmly gazing up at him, tail still whipping back and forth. He shrugged, then said, "I'll take him."

Few people had ever visited Rusty Hannan's cabin. The forty-eight-year-old veteran kept to himself, living off a meager disability pension for a shrapnel wound that still ached at times during the winter months. In the summer, he drove hay trucks and bean pickers for local farmers and earned a few

extra dollars selling firewood. His furniture came from garage sales, his clothing from Goodwill, his meals from a can.

He lived a Spartan lifestyle and, until now, a solitary one. He called the dog Twenty-three, the last two digits of his animal shelter identification number.

Twenty-three had remained on a chain for the first week. The sixty-five dollar adoption fee was considerably more than Rusty had expected to pay, and he didn't intend to pay it twice. The dog's accommodations were equally frugal: a pile of burlap sacks for a bed, a three pound coffee can full of water, and a fifty pound bag of generic food.

Rusty had no idea whether the dog would bark at an intruder if one did show up, but he barked at everything else: coons, possums, squirrels, even birds. It'd already been two weeks since Willie Cooper's death, so maybe the killer had moved on. And maybe he'd shelled out sixty-five dollars for nothing.

When finally given the chance to run loose, Twenty-three often disappeared for hours at a time, especially at night, but by morning he was always back sleeping in his burlap sacks or lying across the back door step. He wasn't al-

lowed in the cabin although he tried to slip inside at every opportunity. His job was to keep watch—outside.

Rusty drove to Ivory Creek every Saturday morning for supplies. He'd left Twenty-three at home the first week, but the following Saturday, when he dropped the tailgate, the dog promptly jumped inside the pickup bed. Rusty tied him to the cab with the shelter leash, remembering Andy Krebs' golden retriever, who had gone over the side into oncoming traffic and was promptly flattened by a bread truck.

Rusty kept a close watch on Twenty-three from the rear view mirror, especially when they reached Ivory Creek. The town was busy, sidewalks crowded, as they usually were on Saturday. He parked on a side street a block from the hardware store. He didn't like leaving Twenty-three where he couldn't keep an eye on him, so he untied the leash and took him along.

The sight of a German shepherd pulling the grizzled six footer briskly down the sidewalk brought stares from several people standing in front of Big Mike's.

Tom Case fearlessly offered his hand to the dog.

Twenty-three sniffed it and left it intact.

Rusty breathed a bit easier.

"Got you a dog, huh?" Tom asked, rubbing the animal's head. "Probably a good idea considering what's been going on around here."

"Hear anything new?" Rusty pushed on Twenty-three's rear end until he sat.

"You mean about Estelle Morley being killed?" Edna, Tom's wife, asked.

"No! When did this happen?"

"Found her yesterday morning on her patio," Tom said. "Back door wide open. They figure it happened sometime during the night."

Rusty shook his head in disbelief. Estelle Morley's place was about two miles from his. She was seventy-eight years old. "Same as the others?"

Tom nodded. "Head's missing. Torn off like the rest."

"Was her place robbed?"

"Purse was still on the kitchen counter with thirty-seven dollars in it," Tom said. "What jewelry she owned was all there, along with the television set. Hell, she'd even had Mike put deadbolts on all the doors two weeks ago."

"It's just horrible," Edna muttered.

"They found her outside?" he asked.

Tom nodded again. "Less than ten feet from the house. I still say it could be some kind of animal. Hell, it'd be nothing for a cougar to take a person's head off, or a wolf, or even a big dog. There sure would have to be something wrong with it, though. Could be rabid, maybe wounded."

Rusty stared down into Twenty-three's gaping mouth. His tongue lolled aside, exposing his pointed white fangs in a big toothy grin. "But with no other bite or claw marks anywhere else on the body?"

"I know," Tom said with a shrug. "It doesn't make sense."

As the front door to Big Mike's swung open, Twenty-three lunged forward, barking, nearly pulling Rusty off his feet. The two men leaving the store stepped carefully out of reach and backed away from the dog. A deep guttural growl, the first Rusty had ever heard Twenty-three make, sent everyone else on the sidewalk into the street.

All the commotion brought Mike Bradford running to the door. "Rusty, what the hell is the matter with that dog?"

"Sorry, Mike. I guess he's not used to being around so many people."

"Well, get him away from the store. I can't have him scaring off my business."

Twenty-three continued to bark and struggle against the leash. By now Tom and Edna Case were inside their car with the doors locked.

"Where'd you get that thing, anyway?" Mike shouted from behind the door.

"Animal shelter in Putnam."

"Don't they check those animals for diseases?"

"Sure they do," Rusty said, using every ounce of strength to restrain Twenty-three. "I got papers that show he's healthy. They checked him at the shelter."

Mike peered skeptically through the crack in the door. "What about rabies?"

"He ain't got rabies. I've had him almost two weeks. This is the first time he's been around a lot of people is all. I think he's just excited."

"You're keeping him tied up, aren't you?"

Rusty knew sometimes it was best to say what people wanted to hear. "Sure, all the time. I had to park a block away. I didn't want to leave him in the back of the pickup while I was in the store."

"Best lock him in the cab then," Mike said.

Rusty nodded, then dragged Twenty-three back to the pickup.

The real reason Rusty had

never gotten another dog after Taffy's death was that he'd known he would be disappointed. As he was disappointed now. Twenty-three couldn't be trusted around people. Eventually he'd bite someone, a little kid or an old lady, and get Rusty sued. Animals had a lot in common with people, there weren't many who could be completely trusted.

Twenty-three went back on the chain when they reached the cabin. Although he'd eventually calmed down during the ride home, Rusty had begun to worry how far the shepherd strayed during his nightly free periods. People knew where he belonged now. He'd be held responsible for any damages or injuries.

Three days later, County Sheriff Harvey Popp showed up at the cabin.

Twenty-three's frenzied barks alerted Rusty to the sheriff's approach the moment the patrol car turned into the lane. The vehicle rolled slowly past the cabin, then parked in the clearing between the back door and the toolshed. Rusty folded his arms and waited on the step. After making certain the dog was chained, Sheriff Popp stepped from the car.

"Afternoon," he said, touching the rim of his hat.

Rusty nodded. "What can I do for you?"

"I have a few questions about your dog."

"My dog?" Rusty chuckled, then shifted his hands to his pockets. He walked to the shed and shouted at Twenty-three to be quiet, which he did.

Sheriff Popp remained purposely outside the chain's perimeter. "I understand you had a problem with the dog in town the other day."

"He barked at some people. That's hardly a problem."

"Look, folks around here are scared to death. Four unsolved murders make them edgy."

"He barked at some people," Rusty repeated curtly.

"Have you always kept him chained?"

Rusty considered the question carefully before answering. "Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"He's been loose on the property before, but I'm always here."

The sheriff rested both hands atop his gun belt and took a couple of small steps forward. "What about at night? You keep him chained up at night?"

Rusty nodded. "Mostly."

"Now, let me explain a couple of things. The first victim, fella down by the river, was said to have a dog, which we never found. Next, Animal

Control over in Putnam tells me they picked up this dog the day after Willie Cooper died, about a half mile away. Finally, Estelle Morley's house is about two miles as the crow flies straight through those trees. So I'm asking you again, do you keep the dog chained up at night?"

"No animal killed those people," Rusty insisted. "If one did, it's damn sure not something I've ever seen before."

Sheriff Popp approached Rusty and the dog but kept a hand poised near his holster. Twenty-three remained silent, seated obediently at Rusty's side.

"Look, I've got to follow through on every lead. The Cooper kid and the transient both had animal hair on their clothing, dog hair. The hairs look like they're from the same animal. The coroner says Mrs. Morley died late Thursday, early Friday. Was the dog loose then?"

"He might have been," Rusty said. "He was off the chain for a couple of nights, but I couldn't swear which ones. Anyway, he was always here when I got up."

Sheriff Popp nodded slowly, then carefully slipped one hand into his jacket pocket, removing a small clear plastic bag. "Suppose you brush a few hairs

into this bag for analysis. And until you hear back from me, you keep that animal chained. If I get wind of him running loose, I'll have to pick him up."

Rusty stroked Twenty-three's back, then deposited the resulting loose hair into the bag. Sheriff Popp sealed it and wrote the date on the corner. "What do you call him?"

Rusty shrugged. "Twenty-three."

"Hell, that's not a name, that's a number."

"He ain't a pet, he's a watchdog."

Sheriff Popp recorded the number on the bag and left.

Twenty-three started barking shortly after two o'clock in the morning. Rusty dressed quickly, took his .22 rifle from the closet, and slipped out the back door. He purposely left the cabin dark. The surrounding stand of Douglas fir filtered the moonlight, silhouetting an ominous landscape of murky shapes and shadows. Yet Rusty knew those shapes and shadows; which belonged, and which did not.

Twenty-three growled and lunged against the chain as Rusty sprinted across the clearing for the cover of the toolshed. From there he could watch the lane, and no one, or thing, could approach within

thirty feet of his position without being seen. Crouched in the darkness, weapon ready, heart drumming in his ears, he thought of another place, another time. He knew what to do. Stay low, quiet. Get off the first shot.

Phantom incoming rounds and ghostly screams echoed along with Twenty-three's frantic yowls. Time tempted Rusty to move into the woods, become the aggressor, but he knew patience was his ally. That and the dog, whose reactions should reveal any movement by an intruder. Twenty minutes after he'd started, Twenty-three finally stopped barking. He sank to his belly, head down, and whined.

Rusty approached him carefully. He'd never seen an animal react so viciously, almost maniacally. If Twenty-three had broken loose, there wouldn't be much left of what ever lurked in the woods.

"Good boy," Rusty said, squatting to scratch Twenty-three behind the ears. The dog's eyes rolled up to meet his in an apologetic gaze. "We'll get him next time."

A search of the woods surrounding the cabin revealed nothing. He'd look again during the daylight.

Rusty returned to bed at four o'clock, but sleep eluded him.

Sheriff Popp was right—four unsolved murders made folks nervous, including him. He didn't know who, or what, was in those woods tonight. Yet after talking to the sheriff, he had another concern. Maybe there wasn't anything there at all.

"They're German shepherd hairs, all right," Sheriff Harvey Popp said.

Every ear in the Ivory Cafe strained in his direction.

"They can't say if they belong to Rusty's dog, though."

"That animal is squirrely," Mike Bradford said. "Went crazy for no reason the other day in front of the store. You ought to pick him up. Better safe than sorry, I say."

"That's right," Art Kimlinger agreed between mouthfuls of pecan pie.

"I can't pick up every mutt in the county just because two bodies had dog hair on their clothing. Hell, I bet most people in this room have some kind of animal hairs on them right now. Besides, the coroner said if the killer was an animal, there should be saliva in the wounds. So far he hasn't found any."

"But you think this dog of Rusty's belonged to the first victim, the hobo?" Mike asked.

Sheriff Popp nodded. "Couple of kids used to fish beneath the bridge said the guy had a dog looked just like Rin Tin Tin."

"That's a German shepherd all right," Kimlinger said confidently.

"And where did Animal Control pick this dog up at?" Mike asked.

"Ridge Road," the sheriff answered.

"Ridge Road?" Kimlinger shouted. "That's right next to where they found the Cooper boy. And he had hairs on his clothing, too."

"Willie loved animals," Shirley, the waitress, interjected. "He'd play with any stray dog or cat that came along."

"That's right," Mike said. "So did Estelle, bless her soul. She'd feed any animal that wandered onto her place. Why, if she saw that shepherd standing on her patio, she'd have gone right out there, without thinking a thing of it."

"What are you going to do about this, Harve?" Kimlinger asked.

"I've already talked to Rusty. He's promised to keep the animal chained up."

Mike Bradford shook his head tentatively. "Rusty's an independent cuss. You really think he'll do it?"

"He damn well better," Sheriff Popp said. "I told him I'd cite

him, plus take the dog if I got wind of it running loose. Everybody knows he ain't got two nickels to rub together, so I figure he'll listen."

After the third night, Rusty knew he should end it, put a bullet in Twenty-three's head. But each morning he found another excuse not to.

During the day Twenty-three acted normal, following Rusty's movements outside the cabin with eager black eyes that begged for attention. The fits had occurred only at night between two and four o'clock, lasted fifteen to thirty minutes, then mysteriously stopped. Although not foaming at the mouth, he behaved as if he were rabid—barking, snarling, nearly strangling himself in an effort to break free.

Rusty considered telling Sheriff Popp about Twenty-three's bizarre behavior but decided against it. It just wasn't his fault. He'd only adopted a dog from the shelter, tried to do the right thing. Still, people in Ivory Creek would find a way to place the blame on him. There was no proof that Twenty-three had killed anyone. Maybe he was wrong about the dog, too.

He searched the woods all day Friday but didn't find any evidence to make him believe someone had been out there, es-

pecially three nights in a row. That night from the back step he ate a dinner of fresh sweet corn and tomatoes while Twenty-three watched from the end of his chain forty feet away. The dog fanned the air with his tail, ears cupped forward, eyes always intent on Rusty. He'd bark occasionally, once or twice, wanting attention.

Tomorrow Rusty planned to stop at Mike's hardware store, eat lunch at the Ivory Cafe, then get a haircut at Jim's barber shop. If there was any news about the murders, he'd learn it in one of those three places. Gossip in a small town was more reliable than a newspaper, faster and cheaper, too. Twenty-three would remain at the cabin.

Rusty sat outside until darkness reduced the view from the back step to patches of grey filtered through a forest-green canopy of fir branches. Before going inside he filled the food and water bowls, then rough-housed with the dog for a few minutes. It was a shame. If it weren't for the temporary bouts of madness, Twenty-three might have made a pretty decent watchdog.

The barking started at one fifteen, an hour earlier than usual. Rusty didn't dress and go out-

side with his rifle as he'd done the previous nights. He didn't even get out of bed. Within twenty minutes the noise should stop and he could go back to sleep. Luckily, his closest neighbor lived a mile away and wouldn't be disturbed by the racket.

The seizure had grown worse. Twenty-three's barks soon turned to throat-rattling growls.

At one thirty the chain broke.

Twenty-three crossed the clearing and rammed the back of the cabin before Rusty's feet hit the floor. Snarling and barking, he scratched furiously at the wood, his fangs ripping at the frame. Rusty knew the door would hold; that wasn't the problem. Once the dog gave up on him, he might go after someone else. There was no choice now but to shoot him.

Following a brief silence, Twenty-three attacked the front door.

Rusty dressed in thick insulated coveralls from the back of the closet. They would afford some protection if the dog got hold of him. If he couldn't get a shot off through a window, he might have to open the door and take his chances. Leaving the lights off to preserve his night vision, he sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled on

his work boots. Again the heavy leather offered some protection, and their steel toes could be used as weapons.

About now he was damn glad he'd built the cabin himself, especially the doors—sturdy two inch fir with inch and a half deadbolts from Big Mike's. The only way inside was with an axe or a key. After testing the front door, Twenty-three circled the cabin, stopping to scratch at each window and frame. Rusty waited in the bedroom, rifle raised, but couldn't get a decent angle for a shot through the small high windowpane.

With luck, the seizure would run its course and Twenty-three would simply lie down, whimpering, the way he'd done on previous nights. If not, Rusty would lure him to the kitchen window alongside the back door. The rectangular window consisted of twelve small panes that were eye level with the kitchen table. He could either break out one pane to take his shot or shoot through the glass.

Twenty-three returned to the back door, where he began to dig furiously at the jamb.

Fully dressed, rifle in hand, Rusty walked from the bedroom into the kitchen. The kitchen and front room formed an L shape, the front room fac-

ing the main road, the kitchen and breakfast table overlooking the clearing and toolshed in the rear.

Twenty-three lunged against the window the moment Rusty entered the kitchen, but the glass held. He stood on his hind legs, front paws propped against the glass, head at waist level, barking viciously. Rusty would never get a better opportunity for a clean shot. He raised the rifle and took a step backward.

The safety clicked off.

"Put it down and raise your hands," a voice behind him said.

Rusty started to turn.

"Don't! I told you to put it down!"

He cautiously lowered the rifle to the kitchen table, then slowly raised his hands overhead.

"Slow now, make it slow—"

Rusty knew that voice but couldn't place it. "What the hell are you doing in my cabin?"

"Nice and easy, no sudden moves. Turn around."

He couldn't make out the face in the shadows, but saw clearly a revolver aimed at his head.

"Lock your fingers behind your head and kneel down. Do it slow, Rusty."

Once the intruder spoke his name, he finally realized his

identity. "Mike? What's going on? How'd you get inside?"

"Aren't you forgetting where you bought your locks? And who cut your spare keys? I thought keeping those key codes would pay off some day. Appears I was right."

"But what are you doing here?"

"Half the folks in town already think that dog's the killer. After tonight they'll all believe it."

Rusty began to lower his hands.

"Keep 'em up!"

"I was gonna shoot him, Mike, honest. I swear I didn't know."

"You dumb hick. You still don't know, do you?"

Mike Bradford stepped forward into the moonlight that filtered through the kitchen window. His right hand leveled a .32 revolver directly at Rusty's head; his left hand gripped a plastic bag and a linoleum knife.

"After they find your body, they'll figure it was the dog all along. I admit I'll miss all that extra business, but I don't really need it any more. Not with Joe and Estelle's loans both paid in full, so to speak."

"You?"

Mike lifted his eyebrows in an innocent shrug. "Sure. I make a decent living from the

store, but not enough to make a dent in that eighty thousand dollar balloon payment I owed on the business. The bank finally called the note. Told me to come up with the whole eighty grand or they'd foreclose."

"Art Kimlinger said you inherited that money from a relative."

He laughed and dropped the plastic bag and linoleum cutter on the floor. "Yep, you sure can trust old Art to spread the word. I told Joe and Estelle it would be better for business if local folks didn't know I borrowed the money from them. Forty grand each at twelve percent. The robbers, both got just what they deserved."

Behind Rusty, Twenty-three continued to scratch at the side of the cabin. Mike smiled and shook his head. "That old bum's dog would sure like to get a piece of me."

"So why didn't he?" Rusty asked.

"Couldn't, he was tied up that night, going nuts just like he is now. He must have finally chewed through the rope and took off before they found the body."

Rusty had to keep him talking, wait for a distraction before making his move. Another step closer and he might stand a chance.

"But why kill the hobo, Mike? And Willie?"

"Practice makes perfect," Mike said, grinning darkly. "I popped that old bum, had his head off and bagged in less than a minute."

"Why the heads?"

Mike's eyes glistened as he spoke. "Ballistics, Rusty. No bullet, no bullet hole, no way to trace it back to me. A head's a hell of a lot easier to hide than a body, too. I've been building a fence around my property this summer, so it was just a matter of making a few post holes a little deeper."

Rusty didn't have to ask many questions to keep him talking. Mike appeared to enjoy sharing his scheme.

"The others were all quick. I just said, 'Hi, Joe, how's it going?' Boom! I let him have it. 'Good evening, Estelle. Lovely night out, isn't it?' Kapow! Then, of course, I had to make sure nobody linked any of the victims together. You know, motive. So I had to make them look random. That dumb Cooper kid had been coming in the store bugging me for years. I figure I did the town a favor."

"So it was you out in my woods at night?"

"Very good. . . . I had to make sure I could get in without tangling with the mutt. You know, Rusty, you really should have

bought a heavier chain. That was close."

"Why don't we just blame it on the dog?" he asked. "I'll back you up."

Mike laughed again. "You must think I'm simple like ol' Willie. Nothing personal, Rusty, but I'm not leaving any witnesses." His arm stiffened as he took aim.

"Wait! How do you plan on getting past the dog on the way out?"

"Hypodermic full of Biotol. I'll stick him through a window. And this time they *will* find saliva in the wounds. And when they find the dog, he'll be covered in blood . . . your blood. Who knows, I might even poke a few pieces of flesh down his throat."

"Mike, wait—"

But he was through talking. He squeezed the trigger.

An explosion of breaking glass corresponded with the crack of the .32. Anticipating the shot, Rusty dived, and at the same time he was knocked forward from behind. Twenty-three yelped and dropped to the floor.

Instinctively, Rusty grabbed the linoleum knife as he tackled Mike Bradford. Mike was a killer, but Rusty was a survivor, trained in hand to hand combat.

They struggled briefly. Mike's second shot lodged in the ceiling as the knife found a home in his throat. He died within seconds.

Rusty switched on the lights and hurried to where Twenty-three lay crumpled on the kitchen floor, whining softly. The bullet had struck him in the right front shoulder and exited above his leg. From what Rusty knew of anatomy, it had probably missed any vital organs but might have broken a bone or two. He pulled two clean kitchen towels from the drawer and applied pressure to the wounds, securing them with strips of electrical tape.

Twenty-three feebly licked at his fingers.

He couldn't call Ivory Creek's veterinarian, Otis Berger, to come to the cabin, so he'd have

to take Twenty-three to town. Art Kimlinger was right about the telephone. He'd have one installed first thing next week.

He ran outside to start the pickup, rushing next to the bedroom for a blanket. He carefully lifted Twenty-three and carried him to the pickup, then laid him on the front seat.

"Easy, boy," he said softly, starting down the lane. "You're gonna be fine, just fine. You're a lucky dog, that's for sure. That's a nice clean wound, straight through. You'll be riding around in the pickup and going to town again before you know it."

The dog lifted his head from the seat, then lowered it slowly against Rusty's thigh.

Rusty smiled and stroked his muzzle. "You're a good dog, Twenty—"

He hesitated.

"You're a good dog, Lucky."

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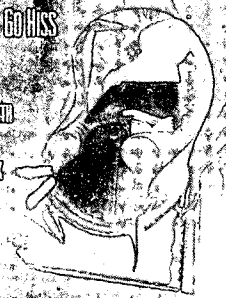
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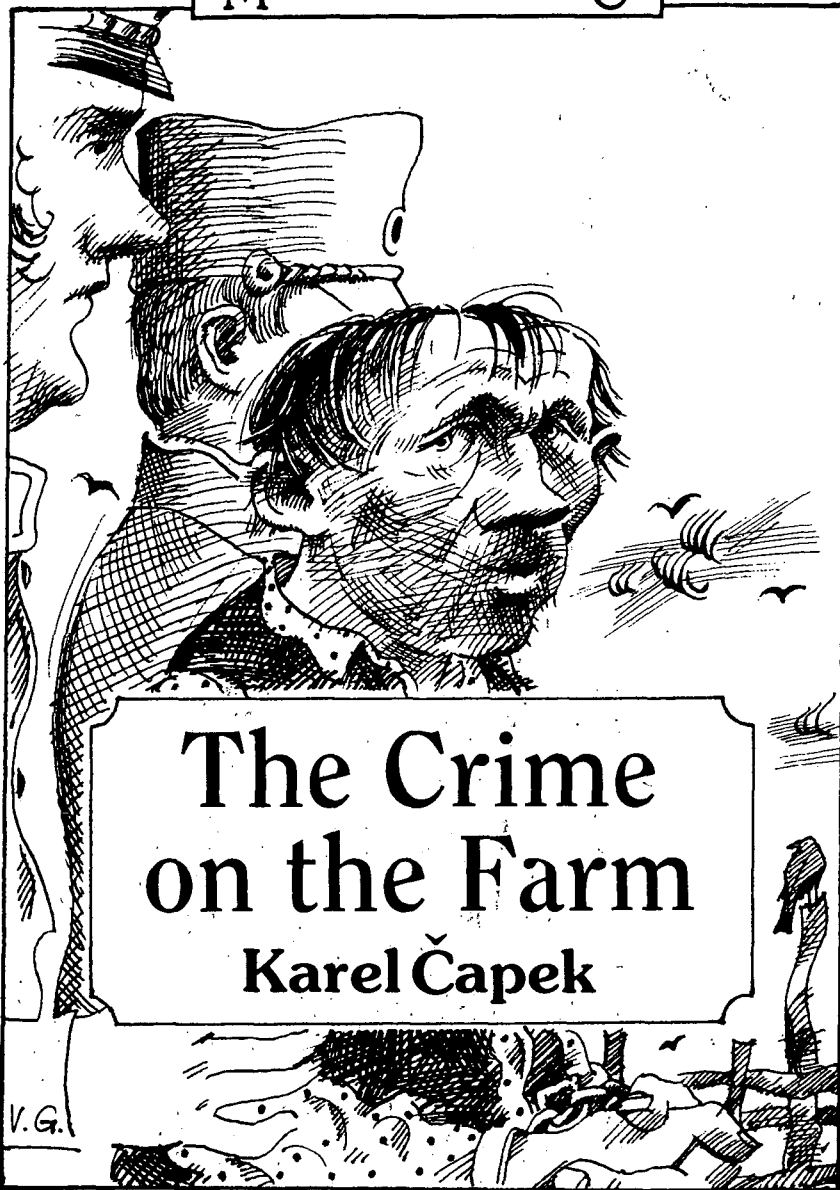
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The Crime on the Farm

Karel Čapek

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“**A**rise, defendant,” the presiding judge said. “You are charged with the murder of your father-in-law, Frantisek Lebeda. During the preliminary questioning, you confessed to having struck him three times on the head with an axe, with intent to kill. Tell me: do you feel yourself to be guilty of this crime?”

The small, workworn man trembled and swallowed something. “No,” he managed to get out.

“You killed him?”

“Sure.”

“Then do you feel yourself guilty?”

“No.”

The presiding judge had the patience of an angel. “Look here, Vondracek,” he said, “we’ve learned that on an earlier occasion you tried to poison him. You put rat poison in his coffee. Isn’t that true?”

“Sure.”

“From this it would appear that you tried to take his life once before. Do you understand me?”

The little man sniffled and shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment. “It was on account of that clover,” he stammered. “He sold that clover, and I kept telling him, Dad, leave that clover alone, I’ll buy me some rabbits—”

“Wait,” the judge interrupted. “Was it his clover or yours?”

“Well, his,” the defendant mumbled. “But what did he need clover for? So I kept telling him, Dad, at least let me have the field with the alfalfa, but he said to me, when I die Marka gets it—that’s my wife—and then you can do what you want with it, you greedy grabber.”

“And that’s why you wanted to poison him?”

“Well, yes—”

“Because he insulted you?”

“No. It was on account of that field. He said he was selling that field.”

“But, man,” the judge burst out, “it was his field, wasn’t it? Why shouldn’t he sell it?”

The defendant Vondracek looked reproachfully at the judge. “Well, sure, but next to that field I have this strip of potatoes,” he

tried to explain. "That's why I bought it, to put that field together with this one, and he said, what's it to me, that potato patch, I'm selling out to Joudal."

"So you were constantly quarreling," the judge prompted.

"Well, sure, sort of," said Vondracek, frowning. "It was on account of that goat."

"What goat?"

"He milked my goat dry. I kept telling him, Dad, leave that goat alone or else give us the little pasture near the creek. But he leased out the pasture."

"And what did he do with the money?" asked one of the jurors.

"Just what he would do," the defendant said glumly. "He hid it in a strongbox. When I die, he said, you get it. But him, he didn't want to die. Even if he was already over seventy."

"Then you're saying that in these quarrels your father-in-law was at fault?"

"He was," Vondracek stated hesitantly. "He didn't want to give anything up. As long as I'm alive, he said, I run this farm and that's that. And I kept telling him, please, Dad, if you buy a cow I'll plow that field and then you won't have to sell it. But he said, after I die you can buy two cows for all I care, but I'm selling that field to Joudal."

"Listen, Vondracek," the judge said sternly, "didn't you kill him because of the money in the strongbox?"

"That money was for a cow," Vondracek replied stubbornly. "We figured that when he died we'd get a cow. A little farm like that needs a cow. How else can I get cow dung?"

"Defendant," the public prosecutor interrupted, "we're not talking about cows, but about a human life. Why did you kill your father-in-law?"

"It was on account of that field."

"That's no kind of answer!"

"He wanted to sell that field."

"But the money would have been yours anyway, after he died!"

"Sure, but he didn't want to die," said Vondracek, offended.

"Your Honor, if he'd just gone ahead and died—I never did anything bad to him, anybody around here'd tell you that. I treated him like my own father, isn't that so?" he said, turning around to the spectators. The auditorium, where half the village sat, rustled in assent.

"Yes," the judge replied gravely, over the noise, "and that's why you wanted to poison him, is that it?"

"Poison," the defendant muttered. "He didn't have to sell that clover. Your Honor, sir, anybody around here'd swear to it. You got to have clover or it's no farm at all, isn't that so?"

The audience murmured its agreement.

"Turn around and face me, defendant," the judge shouted, "or I'll clear the court. Now tell us how the murder came about."

"Well," Vondracek began hesitantly, "one Sunday I saw he was talking to Joudal again. Dad, I said to him, you can't sell that field out from under me. But he said, why should I ask you, you brickmaker? So I said to myself, that does it. Then I went out to chop wood."

"Is this the axe you used?"

"Sure."

"Continue."

"That night I said to the wife, go take the kids to your aunt's. Right off, she starts crying. Turn it off, I tell her, I'm going to talk to him first. So then he comes out to the woodshed and says, that's my axe, hand it over! And I tell him, you milked my goat dry. Then he tries to grab the axe from me. So I hit him with it."

"Why?"

"On account of that field."

"And why did you hit him three times?"

Vondracek shrugged his shoulders. "Well, because—Your Honor, everybody around here's used to hard work."

"And then?"

"Then I went to bed."

"Did you sleep?"

"No. I figured up how much a cow would cost and how I'd trade that pasture for that corner field by the road. Then those fields'd be together, see."

"And your conscience didn't bother you?"

"No. What bothered me was, those fields wasn't together. And then I'd have to fix up a shed for the cow, that would cost a couple hundred. Why, my father-in-law, he didn't even have a wagon. I kept telling him, Dad, God forgive you for your sins, but this is no way to run a farm. Those two fields just belong together, they want it, you can just feel it."

"And didn't you feel anything for the old man?" the judge thundered.

"But he wanted to sell that field to Joudal," the defendant stammered.

"And so you murdered him out of greed!"

"That's not true!" Vondracek protested excitedly. "It was on account of that field! If those fields was together—"

"Don't you feel any guilt?"

"No."

"Murdering an old man means nothing to you?"

"Like I told you, it was on account of that field," Vondracek burst out, almost sobbing. "That's not murder! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, everybody knows that! Why, Your Honor, sir, it was all in our family! I'd never do that to a stranger—I never stole nothing . . . ask anybody about Vondracek . . . and they picked me up like a thief, like some kind of thief," Vondracek moaned, choking in his sorrow.

"No, like a parricide," the judge said sadly. "Do you know, Vondracek, that the penalty for this is death?"

Vondracek blew his nose and snuffled. "It was on account of that field," he stated in resignation; after which the trial dragged on: witnesses, statements by the prosecution and the defense . . .

While the jury was out deliberating the guilt of the defendant Vondracek, the presiding judge stared out the window, lost in thought.

"On the whole, it was pretty weak," another of the judges muttered. "The prosecution never really pressed, nor did the defense have much to say . . . in short, a straightforward case any way you look at it."

The presiding judge snorted. "A straightforward case," he said, dismissing the idea with a wave of his hand. "Listen, my friend, that man feels as much in the right as you or I. It's as if I were judging a butcher for slaughtering a cow, or a mole for making molehills. At times I felt this wasn't our affair at all, if you understand me; not a question of law or of justice—Ahh," he paused to breathe and take off his robe. "I have to get away from this for a while. You know, I think the jury will acquit him. It's absurd, but I think they will acquit him because . . . I'll tell you something: I've got farming blood in me, and when that man said those fields just belonged together, well . . . suddenly I saw those fields, and I felt as if we ought to judge . . . in accordance with some sort of divine law, do you understand me? That we ought to judge those

two fields. Do you know what I would rather have done? I would rather have stood up, put aside my robe, and said, 'Defendant Vondracek, in the name of God, because bloodshed cries out to heaven, sow those two fields with henbane, henbane and thorns. And until the day of your death you will have this fallow of hatred before your eyes . . .' I'd like to know what the public prosecutor would say to that. There are times, my friend, when God alone should judge. You know, He would impose such great and terrible punishments—To judge in the name of God; but we're not equal to that.—What, has the jury reached a verdict already?" With a sigh of reluctance, the presiding judge put on his robe. "Well, then, let's get on with it. Summon the jury!"

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by Mary Cannon



Paula Gosling's *A Few Dying Words* (Mysterious Press, \$18.95) returns readers to the small Great Lakes town of Backwater Bay, the setting of her last book. The tourist season is over, and as Halloween approaches, the townspeople industriously make plans to celebrate the Howl, a long-held annual event in the community. Sheriff Matt Gabriel isn't the only one to dread the upcoming holiday; others agree that the traditional pranks and rivalries among practical jokesters may have turned into vandalism and plain old hell-raising rowdiness. Meanwhile, the dying words of an old friend have Matt digging around an ancient case handled by his father when he was Backwater Bay's sheriff. That has ruffled a few feathers, too. Certainly this will be a Howl the town won't soon forget. Gosling, an American writer, has long lived in England. Her style is evocative of the best of the British village mystery writers, while the Backwater Bay setting is as American as apple pie. Anyone who loves a good cosy will be content curling up with *A Few Dying Words* and a nice cuppa tea.

Opening with the brutal murder of an elderly spinster, British author Robert Goddard masterfully weaves an engrossing web of deception, family secrets, ancient politics, and a treasure hunt in *Hand in Glove* (Washington Square Press, \$12), a beautifully crafted story that's a must-read for any fan of P. D. James. When a shady antiques dealer is charged with the murder of dowager Beatrix Abberley during an attempted burglary, he pleads with his milquetoast brother Derek Fairfax to clear him. Derek starts with the old lady's family and finds a soulmate in spinster Char-

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lotte Ladram, Beatrix's godchild and favorite heir. Charlotte too is disturbed by several puzzling incidents surrounding her godmother's death—and her life. Together the pair set out to unravel the mystery surrounding Beatrix and her famous brother Tristram Abberley, a young poet whose death in the Spanish Civil War immortalized his reputation. As Goddard spins out the threads of a tale that spans fifty years and several continents, a kidnapping heats up the pace and both Charlotte and Derek are required to test their own loyalties. Fully drawn characters, taut suspense, and a devilishly twisty plot make *Hand in Glove* a deeply satisfying read.

Melodie Johnson Howe's sequel to *The Mother Shadow* is finally here, and **Beauty Dies** (Viking, \$19.95) has the same quirky combination of characters and plot that so distinguished her first book. Maggie Hill is a no-nonsense woman who's still surprised to find herself assistant to someone as exotic as Claire Conrad. Conrad is a wealthy, secretive, and enigmatic private eye who travels with an equally attractive and fascinating butler named Boulton. Just as they're preparing to end a stay in New York, Maggie is approached by a pushy young prostitute named Jackie who carries a soft-porn video and alleges that "Cybella didn't kill herself." Claire is supremely uninterested—until Jackie is fatally stabbed. Now the trio must learn the truth behind a legendary model's death. One can't resist the comparison with Nero Wolfe and Archie, with Claire elegantly stationed in swank interiors and Maggie "footing" the investigation. (Boulton, though, is a wild card.) Together they offer a fresh reworking of a tried-and-true formula.

As Manhattan private eye Sydney Sloane and her married sister Nora wait in a nearby restaurant for Nora's childhood friend Zoe Freeman to join them, Zoe is run down in traffic and killed instantly. The festive evening that opens Randye Lordon's **Sister's Keeper** (St. Martin's, \$20.95) has ended in tragedy, and Nora decides to remain in town to make the funeral arrangements. But that same night Zoe's apartment is vandalized. In the rubble Sydney finds a passport in a stranger's name, but the photo is that of Zoe wearing a blonde wig and blue contacts. Meanwhile, Sydney and Nora are growing farther apart the longer Nora stays in town, and the longer Nora remains a houseguest, the more distant Sydney's female lover grows. With her partner and best friend Max, Sydney begins to investigate Zoe's life for clues to her death. Readers looking for a fresh new female private eye, one who exhibits a great sense of humor and a knack for taking care of herself on the

New York streets she knows well, can look to this second entry in a new series.

China Bayles was a high-powered big-city attorney who turned her back on her old life and moved to the small town of Pecan Springs, Texas. She bought a storefront with an apartment attached, planted a large herb garden, and opened Thyme and Seasons, a small shop specializing in all things herbal. She rents the space next door to a lively friend named Ruby who runs a New Age store, and she's happily involved with an ex-cop who teaches criminology at the nearby university. Sound peaceful? Apparently not always so, for **Hangman's Root** by Susan Wittig Albert (Scribner, \$20) is China's third brush with murder. A customer and friend, Dottie Riddle, consults ex-lawyer China over a long-running dispute she has had with her neighbor and fellow university biology teacher, Miles Harwick. Dottie is truly "dotty" about cats, and Harwick is threatening to close down her new back yard kitty shelter. On campus, Harwick's plan to experiment on live animals has outraged antivivisectionists, including Ruby's long-lost daughter, who are picketing daily. When Harwick apparently hangs himself in his office, China is off the hook. Then Dottie is arrested for murder. Readers who enjoy the cosy amateur sleuths of Nancy Pickard and Gillian Roberts will appreciate China Bayles, her credible and appealing supporting cast, and the bushel baskets of herbal lore.

Craig Holden's debut novel, **The River Sorrow** (Delacorte, \$21.95), was touted as a literary thriller. If you can ignore the hype (as well as the author's irritating use of the present tense in his first-person narrative), then sit back and enjoy this medical thriller wherein a reasonably innocent and likeable guy gets inexplicably sucked into a deadly game of drugs, murder, and revenge. The protagonist is Adrian Lancaster, a young doctor who fled to practice medicine in a small town hospital to escape a past as a heroin user and a passionate but ill-fated romance. The death of a stranger in his care one night in the emergency room shocks him out of his complacency and spills him into his nightmare: the day his past catches up with him.

Grant Michaels reprises Boston hairdresser Stan Kraychik, a man ready with both a quip and a curling iron at a moment's notice, in **Mask for a Diva** (St. Martin's, \$20.95). This is a treat for anyone who likes lighthearted backstage mysteries and for opera lovers everywhere: Stan has been hired to help dress the wigs for the opening of the New England Summer Opera Festival

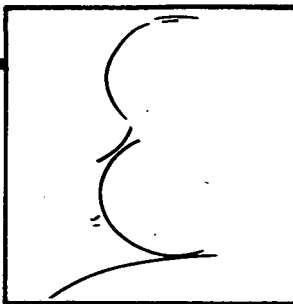
in Boston's North Shore. A lucky accident makes him a houseguest of the opera's patron, the charming older widow Daphne Davenport, where he is perfectly placed wryly to observe the rivalries, romances, and celebrated artistic temperaments of the operatic stars. It also places him at the center of the case when the imbrolios climax in murder, and when the handsome Lieutenant Vito Branco is assigned to the case, Stan finds himself launched in a starring role as police spy. Michaels has provided some wonderfully colorful characters, not the least of whom is the gay hairdresser hero.

Sharon Zukowski's latest Blaine Stewart tale, **Leap of Faith**, offers readers a puzzle, elements of a medical thriller, and a P.I. case with a few hard-hitting action scenes (Dutton, \$18.95). Heiress Judith Marsden walks into Blaine's Manhattan office to hire her to locate a missing child—a missing unborn child. Marsden is a widow who cannot bear a child, but before his death, she and her late husband made arrangements with a surrogate mother who was artificially inseminated. Now the pregnant girl has disappeared with Judith's child, who will one day inherit a huge fortune. Blaine begins with the young woman's parents, only to learn that the girl and her sister died years earlier on the night of their high school prom. So who is carrying Judith's baby? Zukowski explores the themes of family and loyalty in a plot that centers around greed and exploitation.

Rebecca Rothenberg's second Claire Sharples mystery is **The Dandelion Murders** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95). Billed as "A Botanical Mystery," this is more aptly described as an ecological mystery. Claire is an M.I.T. researcher who stumbles on a corpse in a ditch in the San Joaquin Valley; the dead man was wearing a wildflower in his buttonhole that doesn't grow anywhere nearby. Two other recent deaths of migrant workers drowned in this notoriously arid part of the country now seem equally suspicious. Claire is a scientist with an ingrained habit of investigating anomalies, but her research into the deaths doesn't make her very popular with the orchard and vineyard landowners—especially the killer. Rothenberg, an amateur botanist, fills her book with plant lore as well as a look at agribusiness in Southern California.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



In **Disclosure**, Michael Douglas once again hits the screen in a contretemps with a strong and beautiful woman. This time the setting is a cutting-edge computer corporation, and his nemesis is played by Demi Moore.

In this latest battle of the sexes, based on a novel by Michael Crichton, Douglas is Tom Sanders, a family man who's on the way up in a corporate world of computers known as Digicom.

When we first meet Sanders, it looks like a scene right out of *Father Knows Best*—a nineties version based in Seattle. His is a picture perfect world, and anyone can see from miles away that this guy is being set up for a fall. Fall he does.

Sanders fully expects to get a big promotion at the firm, which is involved in megabucks merger talks that, if successful,

will make everyone a lot of money.

So when an outsider is brought in for the job, it's a shock. Shocking, too, for Sanders is the identity of his new boss: it's Meredith Johnson (Moore), a former girlfriend from the days long before he became that picture perfect family man.

What happens next makes the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill relationship look like Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Meredith asks Tom to meet her in her office the evening of her first day on the job. Business, however, is the farthest thing from her mind.

She supplies the wine (his favorite, she recalls), and he provides a back rub she requests in exchange for discussing the product line.

Well, one thing leads to another, and in a scene that isn't

for the squeamish and certainly isn't suitable for minors, Meredith and Tom act, let's say, less than professionally. But in the middle of their sexual muddle, Tom has a fit of conscience and pulls out of the after-hours meeting with business left unfinished.

A disappointed (and scorned) Meredith is left yelling at him as he scampers out of her office, "You get back here and finish what you started," and the poor cleaning woman who witnesses this bizarre exchange winds up somewhere out of the country.

If Tom thought he was surprised when he was passed over for the promotion in favor of Meredith, he's completely flummoxed when he's told the next day that the new boss is accusing *him* of sexual harassment.

From that moment on, Tom's world is turned upside down. His friends and co-workers don't believe his story. His wife, although supportive, is deeply hurt and questions his story as well.

Virtually the only one solidly in his camp is his tough-as-nails attorney, Catherine Alvarez, played with street smarts and just enough self-righteousness by Roma Maffia. Together they embark on a lonely quest to make truth triumphant.

Meredith is out to destroy

Tom—his career, his family, his life. And Tom must do everything he can to save himself, including destroying his powerful new boss in the process.

While *Disclosure* is an entertaining look at corporate intrigue, as well as a twist on sexual harassment in the workplace, its mumbo-jumbo computer jargon left me in the dark.

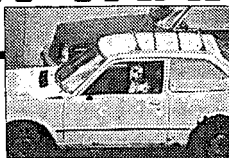
Demi Moore with her rock-hard, muscular body cuts a powerful figure, but her discussions of the company's upcoming technological revolution leave her blank-faced and hardly believable.

The biggest trouble with this film is the motive or lack of one for Meredith's behavior. Would such a business-smart, ambitious female executive really risk it all for a little sexual gratification or power play on the very first day of her big new job?

In addition, why do the company bosses, led by a smarmy, smooth-talking Donald Sutherland, side with her, even at the risk of wrecking the big-bucks merger?

While these things may be clear in the book, the movie offers no explanations. That's a major flaw in an otherwise entertaining film. Forget high-tech when it comes to this story, go low-tech and try the book first.

THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious by Linda Reed of Bakersfield, tions go to Virginia Thompson Henry N. Schulman of San Smith of Garden Grove, California; Stacey Michelle Bridges of New Castle, Pennsylvania; Larry M. Keeton of Martinez, Georgia; Lee Milbourn of Ridley Park, Pennsylvania; Dorothy Kupiec-Carey of DuPont, Washington; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; and Denise Johnston of Kingman, Arizona.

Photograph contest was won California. Honorable mention of Alameda, California; Diego, California; William F.

SPOTTY DOG by Linda Reed

"I say . . . over there, in the car park . . . a spotty dog!"

"A dotty Frog? All those Frogs are dotty. They eat snails, you know."

A mother and teenage daughter pass two old gentlemen on the street and overhear them speaking.

"Grotty togs! Did you hear that? Even strangers on the street think your clothes are a disgrace!"

A middle-aged housewife passes the mother and daughter on the sidewalk and mutters under her breath, "A lot of hogs? Must be country people. That explains the poor child's clothing."

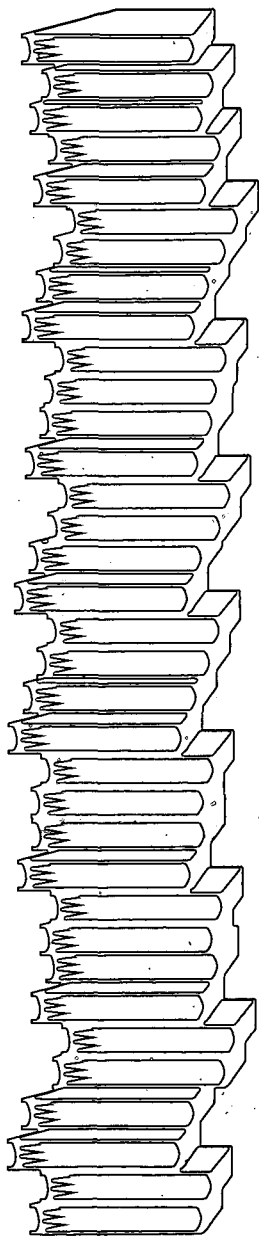
A chic young couple pass the woman and hear her talking to herself.

"Knotty logs—just the thing for the new sitting room suite! That rustic look is all the rage, you know."

Another couple, older and less chic, overhear the younger couple as they pass by.

"Naughty jogs? That's her, isn't it? Is that a code word for what you plan to do with her tomorrow? That brazen hussy! Slipping you a message in front of her husband and your wife. I'll show you!"

And she pulled out a lovely small gun from her handbag and shot him. She had planned to do it at home, but it worked out for the best this way. The lunch hour was ending, and there was no one left on the street. No one watching but a spotty dog across the way, sitting in a parked car.



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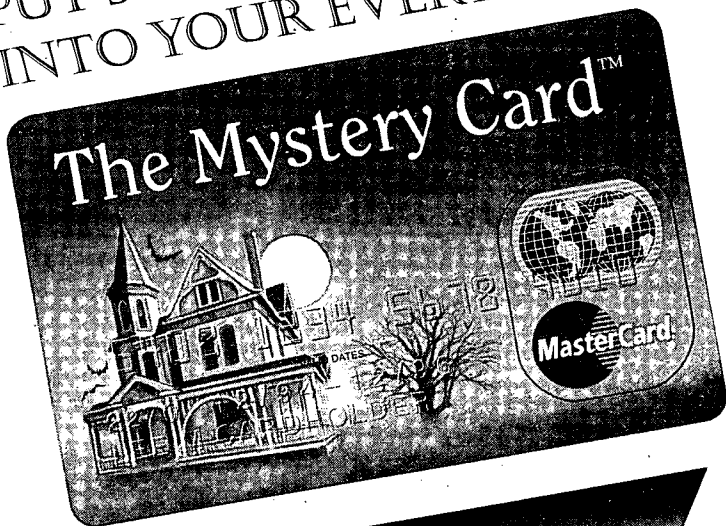
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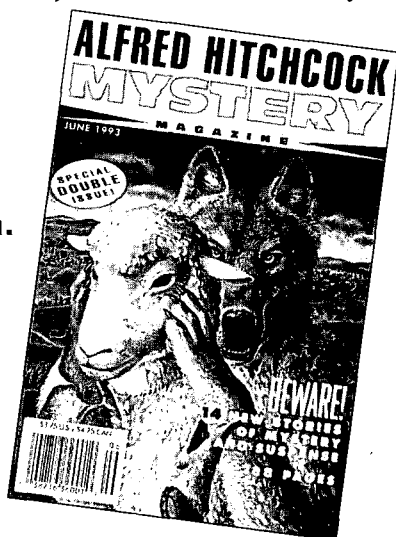
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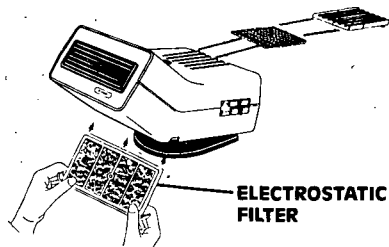
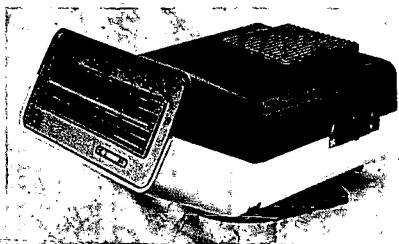
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